

THE FIRST PART OF A STORY NO ONE ELSE WAS
SUPPOSED TO READ

First ECHO



REBECCA A. JACKSON

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read*

Rebecca A. Jackson

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*For those who find the courage to be seen, and those who take the time
to truly look. Your echoes matter.*

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PART ONE

Encounters

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CHAPTER ONE

BROOKE

Of all the days to show up, I picked the one that changed everything. If I had known my whole life would change just because I decided to go to school instead of staying home while I was tired, I still would've gone. That was just who I was—diligent, ambitious, and earnest. Those were a few of the Brooke Winters trademarks. So no, I wasn't going to skip school just because I was tired. After all, I couldn't skip school. I had to keep my perfect attendance.

It was cold today. Not just the temperature—everything about today felt cold. It was like every sound of life was subdued, every ounce of warmth and energy just gone. Winter had truly started, clinging to every street corner and fence post, reminding me that the brightest days of fall were over. The sky was a dull gray that stretched endlessly, giving the impression that the world extended into a vast expanse of nothingness. The clouds hung low, as if they carried secrets, they weren't yet ready to spill. I remember looking out my window and seeing a few stray birds fly by, their silhouettes barely visible through the haze of the morning. It felt oddly comforting, though, seeing those birds defying the chill in the air. Part of me wondered if they had enough sense to fly somewhere warmer or if they, like me, simply refused to give in.

I heard my dad downstairs making breakfast. *Not only did I hear it, but I smelled it too.* He had forgotten to open a window, again. Even though my whole room now smelled like food, the scent of pancakes wasn't a bad thing to wake up to. The aroma was thick and buttery, seeping into my blankets and pillows. It reminded me of slower, simpler mornings when I was younger, when I'd sit on the kitchen floor and watch my mom cook. She would flip pancakes with such ease, always smiling despite the early hour. Sometimes I'd help stir the batter until my arm got tired, and she would laugh at how determined I was to do it by myself.

Ever since my mom died of cancer four years ago, my dad had never really been the same. *Neither had I.* He put up this front like everything was fine, like nothing had happened. He did that for me. He thought that was what I wanted, but truth be told, I didn't know what I wanted. There was an unspoken understanding that neither of us really had the right words to make it better. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I'd sneak downstairs for water and find him at the kitchen table, staring at an old photograph of my mom. He'd pretend he was just tired, rubbing at his eyes, hiding the fact that he had been crying. I never confronted him, because I wasn't sure if my words would be a comfort or just make things worse.

Talking or even thinking about her hurt so much that it felt like a sharp, stinging pain in my chest, almost as if someone was trying to rip out my heart. But remembering the good memories we all shared together made me truly happy, until I realized she was gone, and she wasn't coming back. Sometimes, I'd catch a glimpse of her in the corner of my vision—maybe just a trick of the light or my mind's wishful thinking. I'd turn around in excitement, only to face the harsh reminder that she was no longer there. That intangible ache in my chest, it was something I'd gotten used to, like a bruise that never quite healed.

"Breakfast is ready!" my dad yelled.

"I know, I can smell it!" I said, laughing. The smell of pancakes was so strong the entire house smelled like it. "Smells good though. I'll be down in a sec!"

I quickly put on a pair of dark grey sweatpants along with a navy blue Carhartt hoodie, which I had already worn but had thrown on my *clothes chair* and ran downstairs. The cold air nipped at my ankles, but my hoodie provided just enough warmth to keep me from shivering. There were boxes in the hallway that never seemed to get put away—old knickknacks and random decorations that my mom once loved, things my dad couldn't bear to move. Every day I saw them, every day I was reminded of the life we had and the one we were struggling to build now.

"Good morning, Dad," I said, stunned as I stared at the kitchen *covered in pancake supplies*. "Did something explode, or what?"

When I said there was flour and eggs everywhere in the kitchen, I meant everywhere. There wasn't a single piece of black marble from the countertop visible. Eggshell fragments balanced precariously on the edges

of mixing bowls, and a light dusting of flour gave the whole countertop a ghostly appearance. The scene might have been disastrous, but there was also a certain cozy chaos to it that felt strangely welcoming. It was our house, after all—mess and all.

“Ha ha, really funny,” he said. “I am making pancakes.”

“Yes, I can see that. Are you trying to feed the kitchen too?”

“Just sit down and eat your pancakes.”

I grabbed a plate, put some pancakes on it, and sat down at the table. They were warm and soft, with a sweet aroma that made it impossible not to smile. I could almost taste the memory of my mom’s pancakes, but I tried not to linger on that thought for too long. I smothered them in syrup, letting the sticky sweetness soak in before taking the first bite. After about five minutes, I finished eating. My dad was almost done cleaning the kitchen, and I couldn’t help but chuckle at him trying to wipe the flour from every surface. He was so dedicated to the task, muttering to himself whenever he noticed more flour on his sleeves.

I laughed at him and ran upstairs to get ready for school, feeling that same mixture of affection and sadness that seemed to follow me whenever I thought about the things we used to do as a complete family. In my room, I brushed my teeth, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My hair was slightly disheveled, and my face showed the signs of a poor night’s sleep, but I told myself I could manage a presentable look for school. Perfect attendance, sure, but that didn’t mean I was always the most put-together person.

I grabbed my bag and got in the car. The drive to school felt longer than usual, the sky still that muted gray, the roads still slick from last night’s frost. My dad fiddled with the radio, searching for a decent station. All we got were songs I’d heard countless times, so I stopped paying attention. I thought back to the smell of pancakes and the messy kitchen and found myself wishing I had taken one more minute to just sit there with my dad. Those little moments were precious, moments I realized I shouldn’t take for granted.

School was the usual blur of people. Hallways were crowded with cliques of laughing students, each group forming its own little bubble of drama and gossip. Some waved to me, and I waved back mechanically. I could already feel my headache coming back, probably from the remnants

of my cold, but I pressed on. I found my seat in the classroom, right by the window where the sun would sometimes shine through. It was dim outside, though, the clouds unwilling to allow more than a faint light.

There she was, late as usual. The teacher didn't even bat an eye. Why would he? It was just Madeline Hayes. What was he going to do? Call her out on it and risk getting humiliated in front of the class? Or tell the principal and risk getting fired because of some ridiculous stunt Madeline's parents would probably pull? Yeah, no, I didn't think so.

Madeline Hayes was the very essence of the kind of people who ruined the world. She didn't care about anyone but herself. She did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted to. I was not exactly a big fan of hers. But the rest of the school—hell, the rest of the town—was. People worshipped her without fully realizing they were doing it. Half the girls wanted to be her best friend, the other half wanted to be her. And almost every guy probably wanted to date her or at least have the social status that came with being in her orbit.

She just walked in, with her toned but skinny legs, like she was untouchable. Her blonde, picture-perfect 90s blowout framed her face perfectly, and her golden, very expensive jewelry complemented her slightly tanned skin. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she knew that she was, as a matter of fact, untouchable.

I found myself trying to disappear into my seat, not that she would notice me anyway. My eyes flicked toward the windows, taking in the swaying branches of the bare trees outside. The teacher started his lecture, his voice a low hum in the background. Everything felt suspended in that moment—my cold, the lingering sadness, Madeline's entrance—as if life was balancing on the edge of something I couldn't quite put a name to. Little did I know, the day would prove just how fragile that balance really was.

In those last few moments of calm, I remember focusing on a loose thread on my backpack, gently twisting it around my finger. Sometimes those quiet details, the small, inconsequential things, are what keep us grounded. I had no clue what was about to unfold, or how drastically my life would change from something as simple as *going to school while I was sick*. But if I had known, I truly would have done the same thing. Maybe that's just who I am, the kind of person who doesn't let excuses get in the way—no matter what storms might come next.

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CHAPTER TWO

MADELINE

I was so tired when I woke up this morning. The sheer coldness of the early hours seemed to creep into my bones, making every part of me want to stay buried under the blankets for as long as humanly possible. My alarm had been blaring for several minutes, an irritating buzz that felt like it was echoing right inside my skull. So, obviously, I snoozed it, thinking I'd allow myself just another two minutes of precious sleep. Not exactly one of my finest moments. Because, as it turned out, my body decided it needed more than a couple of minutes. When I finally opened my eyes again, nearly a full hour had passed, and my phone's screen showed the time in unforgiving digits. I realized with a jolt that I was already going to be late for school, even if I dashed out the door right then.

A quick glance outside my bedroom window showed a frost-covered lawn and a gray sky that looked heavy with unfallen snow. It was so cold, and I wanted nothing more than to curl back up in bed. But instead, I dragged myself to the bathroom. I stared at my reflection in the mirror for a moment, taking in the slight puffiness around my eyes from lack of sleep. My hair was an unruly mess, like I'd been thrashing around in my dreams. I reached for my brush, figuring there was no point in rushing if I was already going to be late. I might as well take my time and try to look halfway decent. If I'm doomed to be late, why not at least look good doing it?

By the time I was done with my hair—an elegantly tousled, blowout style that took me way too long—it was even later than I expected. I just shrugged. I grabbed my makeup bag, dabbing a bit of concealer under my eyes and some light mascara on my lashes. The process usually calmed me, like a small ritual that helped me get into the right headspace for the day. I picked out a sleek outfit from my closet, something stylish but casual enough for school. While zipping my jacket, I realized the house was still

eerily quiet. My parents had already left for work, as they often did around this time. Julian, my twin brother, had probably gotten ready much earlier—or at least earlier than me. I wondered if he had tried to wake me, but knowing him, he'd just let me sleep and then take the chance to mock me for being late later on. That's typical Julian for you.

By the time I finally made it to school, I could feel the judgment in the hallway as I walked toward class. The hall monitors didn't even bother stopping me; they probably assumed I had some sort of free pass to do as I pleased. My parents were well-known in this town, and I knew how that looked to everyone else, but I couldn't care less at the moment. Mr. Sinclair didn't exactly look pleased when I walked in late, but he didn't seem to care enough to say anything, either. One glance at him told me he was probably too tired of the same old story—Madeline Hayes, rolling in whenever she felt like it. He was a tall, lanky man with slightly graying hair, and he wore the same weary expression he usually did whenever I strolled in late.

I looked around and saw that Sam had saved me a seat, so I made my way over to the empty chair. Sam was my closest friend, though most people found it surprising that we were as tight as we were, given how different we seemed. As I walked, I noticed a few classmates flicking glances at me. Maybe they were thinking about how irresponsible I was, or maybe they admired the coat I was wearing. Honestly, it was impossible to tell, and I wasn't in the mood to analyze it too deeply.

"Morning, Sammy," I said as I pulled out my chair. The legs made a dull scraping sound on the floor, causing one of our classmates in the next row to wince slightly. Sam wasn't looking very happy. His posture was tense, and he was flipping through pages of a textbook in a slightly agitated way.

"Why are you so late? Again?" he said, clearly annoyed. I noticed the faintest wrinkle in his forehead, the one that showed up when he was exasperated by something I'd done.

"Well, good morning to you too, Mads," I replied in a playful tone, as I sat down and took my books out of my bag.

"How did you sleep, Mads?" I gave him a bright, sarcastic smile. I hated it when he judged me for such stupid little things. Honestly, who cared if I was late to class? As long as I didn't fail, nobody would even care if I didn't show up at all. He should just be happy I showed up in the first place.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that, Mads, but you can’t keep showing up this late or not showing up at all for this class,” he said, lowering his voice so that Mr. Sinclair wouldn’t overhear. Sam tried to maintain an air of calm, but his impatience was clear. I could see the muscle in his jaw tighten ever so slightly.

“Why not?” I said sarcastically, flipping open my book to a random page. It wasn’t like I was failing, at least not up until recently, so what was the big deal? I got a C on the last test, which was lower than my usual grades, but nothing to freak out about.

“You know why,” he insisted, tapping his pen on the desk in a steady rhythm.

“Your grades aren’t exactly good.”

I could see Sam getting more annoyed by the second, which I actually found pretty funny. In another part of my mind, I realized he was just looking out for me, but at that moment, I couldn’t help but be irritated by his fussiness.

“Okay? So what?” I scoffed. “I got a C on the last test. It’s not like he’s going to fail me.”

“You don’t know that, Mads,” he sighed, trying to keep his tone neutral. “Just try to be on time next time.”

In that moment, I wanted to yell at him to mind his own business. But Sam had always been kind, helpful, and supportive. I couldn’t do that to him. Not here, at least, not in front of all these people. The classroom was buzzing with chatter as everyone waited for Mr. Sinclair to begin his lesson. A few other students glanced our way, but nobody seemed overly interested in our conversation.

“Fine,” I sighed.

“I’ll try to make it on time next time.” I really, really wasn’t going to, but Sam didn’t need to know that.

“Thank you,” he said, a big smile spreading across his annoyingly handsome, chiseled face. Sometimes, I really despised how he could flash that grin and make me feel a little guilty for lying. But I pushed the thought aside and focused on Mr. Sinclair, who was rummaging through a stack of papers.

Finally, Mr. Sinclair got up and started passing back our tests, a habit he had of doling out our academic fates in front of the entire class. My heart

gave a little lurch when I saw my grade. An F.

“Are you kidding me?” I muttered in frustration, keeping my voice low so only Sam could hear. I had never studied so hard for a test, and I got an F? The last time, I got a C without even trying. I didn’t show up to class, I didn’t do the homework, yet I somehow managed to pass. And now that I actually studied, I got an F. What was happening to me?

“What is it?” Sam asked, leaning over to see my grade. I already knew what he was going to say.

With that same annoyingly handsome grin, he looked up at me, trying to hold back a laugh. His eyes sparkled with a certain triumph, and I could see he was attempting to look sympathetic, but the corners of his mouth betrayed him.

“I told you so,” he said, letting the laughter out in a playful snort.

Suddenly, my twin brother, Julian, who sat just one row over, immediately spun his stupid, round, oversized head around and smirked. He had a habit of eavesdropping and jumping in at the worst times.

“Oh wow, tough break, Mads. Mom and Dad are not going to be happy,” he teased, like he’d been waiting for a chance to put me down.

I hated him. I hated his constant, annoying little comments. But unfortunately, he was Sam’s best friend, which only complicated things. So not only did I have to deal with him at home every single day—more than enough by itself—but I also had to see him at school since we ended up in the same friend group more often than not.

“Yeah, they’ll probably have the same reaction they had when you were born,” I shot back without missing a beat, my words dripping with sarcasm. In my mind, I gave myself a big congratulatory pat on the back for that one. Well done, Mads. Well done.

“Hey, don’t be mad at me, I got a B,” he said, mocking me with a wide grin. Julian’s eyes were dancing with mischief, enjoying every second of my frustration. He was always competing with me, and each time I slipped up, he took it as an opportunity to hammer home how he had it all figured out.

He and Sam had been best friends since kindergarten. In a way, that was how I ended up meeting Sam in the first place. I fell for my brother’s best friend—so cliché, I know. But Sam was so genuinely good that it was impossible not to find myself drawn to him. Even though Julian was just

about the opposite of Sam, they somehow managed to remain close through all these years, as if their differences balanced out in a weird, cosmic way.

Once the class ended, we all grabbed our bags and made our way to the door, but Mr. Sinclair stopped me.

“Miss Hayes, a word please?” he said, his eyes narrowing a bit.

I paused, bracing myself. I wondered if it was about my grade or the fact that I was late again. I really, really hoped it was the latter. Sam looked at me, as if uncertain whether he should wait around. I nodded my head toward the exit, giving him and Julian permission to head out. They both left with that same concerned look on their faces, though Julian still had a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Mr. Sinclair, if this is about the fact that I was late this morning, I just overslept and it won’t happen again,” I said as quickly as possible, trying to sound sincere. Oh, it most definitely would.

“It’s not about that,” he replied, pursing his lips.

“Well, a bit, but the main problem is that you are going to fail this class, Madeline.”

I felt my heart sink lower than it had before. Me, Madeline Hayes, failing a class? How was that even possible? Sure, I’d skated by plenty of times without studying properly, but I always managed to scrape a passing grade.

“You’re a smart girl, and I do believe that with the right guidance, you can pass. So that’s why I’m assigning you a tutor,” he said, his tone decisive.

I stared at him in disbelief. A tutor? A tutor? As if almost failing a class wasn’t embarrassing enough, now I had to spend time with some random nerd who probably thought they were better than me? The idea of it made my stomach twist with anxiety and resentment.

“Mr. Sinclair, I don’t think—” I tried to protest, but he raised a hand to silence me.

“It’s already arranged, Madeline,” he said, his voice calm yet firm.

“If you don’t agree to the sessions, I have no choice but to inform your parents. And I know you don’t want that.”

He handed me a small piece of paper with a name scrawled on it. I skimmed it, my eyes catching the faint handwriting that detailed where and when I was supposed to meet this tutor. Yeah. No. Absolutely not. But as I

slid the paper into my pocket, I couldn't help but realize that I might not have much of a choice if I wanted to survive my parents' wrath and maybe even salvage my grade.

Outside the classroom, I caught sight of Sam and Julian standing by the lockers. They looked up as I stepped into the hallway, clearly curious about what happened. I forced a smile, though I felt anything but happy. The halls were bustling with other students heading to their next class, some laughing with friends, some staring at their phones, a few trying to cram in some last-minute reading. Everything carried on as usual. But for me, that one short conversation with Mr. Sinclair had changed everything.

I could practically feel the weight of that piece of paper in my pocket, the threat of failing swirling in my mind. It was like the cold I felt this morning had settled inside me, chilling my thoughts. I realized that, even though I despised the idea, this tutor might be my best shot at turning things around. That didn't mean I had to be happy about it, though. Absolutely not.

CHAPTER THREE

BROOKE

I was walking toward the library to study when I got an email from Mr. Sinclair. It struck me as odd to hear from him so soon, especially since I had only just left his classroom ten minutes ago. My phone vibrated softly in my pocket, and for a moment I debated whether I should read the message right away or wait until I was settled in the library. Curiosity got the better of me, so I tapped open the email while navigating the busy hallway.

I got an A on my test, which was pretty good, though I was almost too anxious to feel proud. Tests always made my stomach twist in knots. As I read Mr. Sinclair's email, I felt a faint flicker of satisfaction flicker alongside uncertainty.

Hi Brooke, I was wondering if you had the time to tutor a fellow student. She is going to fail my class if she doesn't get an A on the next test, and since you are my best student, I thought you were well qualified for the job. I look forward to hearing from you! Kind regards, Mr. Sinclair

I was not surprised he asked me. People often said I was a natural when it came to academics, and in Mr. Sinclair's eyes I might have been the perfect candidate for tutoring. *I really was his best student.* Still, I wondered who he was talking about. My mind flicked through possibilities—perhaps someone like Nathan who usually fell asleep in class, or maybe Charlotte who rarely paid attention. It was unusual for Mr. Sinclair to reach out so directly, so this situation must have been urgent.

I stopped by a row of lockers to quickly type my response.

Hi Mr. Sinclair, yes, that's fine. I would appreciate it if you could tell them to meet me at the tutoring center after school so we can pick a date and time for our first session. Sincerely, Brooke Winters

With that handled, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and continued down the corridor. The library doors stood at the far end, tall and

made of thick glass. A dull hush emanated from within, promising a haven where I could study undisturbed for a while. Outside, a couple of students gathered in small groups, chatting in hushed voices about weekend plans, upcoming exams, or maybe the latest gossip. I passed by them, feeling only a mild sense of detachment. I was thinking about who I might end up tutoring. My mind drifted between different scenarios, imagining how that first session might go. I was usually patient but tutoring someone who barely tried could be frustrating. *I hoped this student would be at least somewhat motivated.*

After classes ended for the day, I left the main school building and made my way toward the tutoring center. It was a separate annex, right behind the gym, with large windows that often let in the late afternoon sunlight. That day, the sky was overcast, and the light was gloomy, so there was only a faint glow in the windows as I approached. Now and then, a stray gust of wind blew, causing the trees around me to rustle. There was a sidewalk that led from the main entrance to the tutoring center, its concrete cracked in places from the changing seasons. *I was careful not to trip, especially since I had my eyes half-focused on the building and half on my phone notifications.*

Through the window, I saw someone standing inside, a single silhouette against the fluorescent lights. My vision was a little blurry from forgetting to put in my contacts, which really annoyed me since I was sure I'd set them out next to the sink the night before. *Stupid.* I scolded myself for being so careless. The figure in the window moved slightly, turning as if scanning the room. I thought maybe they were tapping their foot; they had that impatient stance you notice from a distance.

The closer I got, the clearer they became, though the haze of my bad eyesight still blurred the details of their face. A cold tingling crept over my skin, as if my intuition was warning me that something unexpected was waiting inside. A tiny part of me hoped this was just some random student getting help in algebra, not the person I was supposed to meet.

Until I walked through the door.

Oh no. No no no. Madeline Hayes. My heart sank into my stomach. That was the last name I wanted to hear. It was enough to make my cheeks feel warm, a mix of shock and dread. Not only was she infamous for being difficult, arrogant, and unbelievably popular, she was also the type of

person I tried my best to avoid altogether. Now I was apparently supposed to *tutor* her?

Madeline Hayes needed tutoring. From me? I felt a rush of conflicting emotions. Why me? Of course, I knew why it had to be me—Mr. Sinclair’s top student, the one who always showed up on time, who always studied. Still, it felt like some cruel cosmic joke.

She turned around at the sound of the door, her eyes raking over me as if she were evaluating whether I was worth her time. Her gaze made me feel both self-conscious and strangely indignant.

“Are you Brooke?” she asked, her polished voice laced with mild curiosity. She cocked her head slightly, allowing a few strands of her flawless blonde hair to fall across her shoulder.

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

I had never spoken to her before. Not directly, anyway. I’d heard plenty of stories about her, and I had seen her from a distance in class. She was indeed quite pretty up close, an observation that twisted into annoyance because I knew how much power that beauty gave her in social circles. She carried herself with an easy grace, as if the world existed solely to revolve around her.

For a few long seconds, we just stood there, staring. The silence between us grew awkward, so I tried to break it with the *dumbest question possible*.

“So, uhm... you need a chemistry tutor?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Why else would I be at the tutor center?” she scoffed, her tone dismissive.

I laughed, although I had no idea why. There was nothing genuinely funny about the situation. Maybe it was my nerves kicking in. She was so arrogant that I was at a loss for how to respond in a way that felt natural. It was like trying to figure out the right key to unlock a door that refused to budge.

“Right. So when do you have time?” I managed to say, trying to at least sound businesslike, though my voice trembled slightly.

“Thursday at five. My house,” she said promptly, already turning on her heel as if our conversation was done.

And just like that, I was reminded of why *I hated her so much*. She had not even asked if Thursday at five worked for me; she just assumed I would

rearrange my life to accommodate her. In reality, I had an after-school study group with some friends, but the bigger point was that she did not care. Her eyes had barely flicked in my direction once she had given me the time, like I was just another person in her life who would do as she wanted.

She also didn't bother telling me her address, because of course she knew that *everyone* knew where Madeline Hayes lived. Her family's estate was practically a local landmark. And I could see she loved that about her life. She thrived on it, like a gardener carefully cultivating the envy and admiration of others.

As I drove home, a thousand thoughts churned in my mind. *I couldn't stop thinking about how infuriating she was.* My fingers tightened on the steering wheel whenever I replayed our brief conversation, especially the part where she basically commanded me to come to her house. The headlights of passing cars flashed through my window, creating a dizzying array of light and shadow across my dashboard. But it was that swirl of conflicting emotions—anger, annoyance, and a tiny flicker of something else—that truly unsettled me.

She made me feel nervous, though I was not sure why. Maybe it was the way she looked at me, or maybe it was her confidence. Or maybe it was something buried deeper, an unspoken tension or curiosity. I could not put a finger on it, but I did know one thing.

I was never going to let Madeline Hayes control me like another one of the brainless Barbie dolls she called friends.

With that promise burning in my thoughts, I pulled into my driveway. The sky was streaked with pink and orange from the setting sun, which was almost pretty enough to soothe my irritation. Almost. As I gathered my books and headed into my house, I could not help wondering if I was getting into something more complicated than just helping someone pass chemistry.

I trudged up the front steps, the familiar creak beneath my feet reminding me of home and routine. In a small way, I was relieved to be back in my own space, a place where I was just *Brooke*, and not trapped in Madeline's world of glamour. Yet I also had to admit, deep down, that I was curious about how Thursday at five would unfold, whether I liked it or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

MADELINE

I can't believe I need tutoring. Just thinking about it made my stomach twist into a painful knot. I was never the kind of person who needed extra help in school. In fact, for most of my life, academics were barely something I worried about. I showed up, did the minimum, and still got decent grades. Until now. Until *chemistry*. This was so embarrassing. I didn't even know where the tutoring center was and had to awkwardly ask one of the hall monitors for directions. They looked at me with a slight smirk, like it was amusing to see *me* lost on school property. The nerve.

I'd barely ever been around after classes, let alone set foot in the tutoring center. I usually had better things to do, like sneaking out with friends, driving around town, or attending parties I probably should have skipped. But there I was, turning the doorknob to a place that felt utterly foreign.

The moment I stepped inside, a horrible smell assaulted my nose—this humid odor that reminded me of *wet dog*. It was like the ventilation didn't work properly or something. There were a few ancient couches lining the walls, sagging in the middle, and some battered-looking desks scattered around the small, window-lined room. Sticky notes were pinned on the notice board, advertising math help, literature tutoring, extra-credit sessions for biology. It all felt so far removed from my life that I cringed just from being there. *This is my worst nightmare come true.*

I glanced at my phone. It showed that class had ended a good fifteen minutes ago, or at least it had for me. The teacher ended our lesson early, and I took advantage, slipping out quickly. Now I stood, fidgeting in front of a cracked whiteboard that displayed tomorrow's tutoring schedule. There was no mention of my name, which only served to remind me how alien this whole place was to me.

Where even is this tutor? The more time passed, the more desperate I felt to escape before anyone I knew could walk by and witness me in this place.

There was a slight draft from the windows, which rattled a bit in the frames. The day was miserably cold, and I had to wrap my arms around myself for warmth. At least the tutoring center was quiet—no prying eyes or mocking whispers yet.

As I waited, I looked through the window and noticed a figure approaching the door. The glass was a bit foggy from the inside, making it hard to see any defining features. But as the door opened, letting in a rush of chilly air, I saw a short girl, about 5'3, walk in. Her long brown hair was cut into one of those layered, wavy styles that looked effortless, like she barely thought about it but still managed to make it work. It framed her face and fell over her shoulders in a way that wasn't overly done, just... there. Her cheeks were pink from the cold outside, and she reached up to smooth a few stray strands behind her ear.

The frames accentuated her dark eyes, giving her a bookish, studious look. She wore black boots and dark blue jeans that clung nicely to her legs. Topping off the outfit was a shapeless and somewhat boring hoodie—like she didn't particularly care about the latest trends or how she looked. It was a stark contrast to the carefully curated outfits I was used to seeing (and wearing) every day.

I recognized her from my chemistry class, even though I barely paid attention to anyone in that room. But I had no idea she was a tutor. Then again, *I didn't even know her name* before Mr. Sinclair told me to meet a *Brooke Winters* here. So it wasn't exactly a shock that I didn't know her story. She looked at me with a hint of hesitation, probably as taken aback as I was.

I just wanted to leave as soon as possible, so I did the first thing that popped into my head: I set the time and place on my terms and made my exit. I told her to meet me at my house on Thursday at 5 pm. It's not like someone like *her* would have plans on a Thursday night, right? She looked a bit flustered at how curt I was, but I figured that was her problem, not mine.

As soon as I left, I got this sinking feeling in my chest, reminding me that *as much as I wanted to go home*, I was also dreading what awaited me there. I just knew Julian had already tattled to our parents that I got an F in chemistry, and then I'd have to admit I needed a tutor, which was

humiliating on its own. So I made a decision: I went for a drive to clear my head before dealing with that chaos.

My car is one of the only things in my life I can actually call *mine*. I turned on the engine and felt a sense of relief wash over me as I pulled out of the school parking lot, the tires crunching over stray gravel. The roads were quiet in that late-afternoon lull, with only a few cars passing by. I fiddled with the radio, jumping from station to station until I landed on some pop song I halfway liked. The sky was gray, threatening rain or maybe even snow, and the gloom outside matched my mood. I drove aimlessly around town, passing the same old diners, boutiques, and that run-down cinema that had been closed since forever. Everything looked dull and lifeless, but part of me found solace in the emptiness. At least nobody was bothering me here in my car.

Eventually, though, I couldn't keep going in circles forever. I *had* to go home. So I pulled up into our driveway, feeling the tension coil inside me like a spring. The house loomed large and imposing, pristine white walls and enormous columns that practically screamed *old money*. My parents loved to flaunt our family name whenever they could.

I saw the front door opening, and in the doorway stood Julian with a big smile on his face. I instantly knew he'd already spilled the beans about my grade and was probably gloating. My dear twin brother lived for moments like these. He had that stupid, smug look on his face, the one where he narrowed his eyes just enough to look like a cat about to pounce on a helpless mouse. I shoved him aside as I walked in, not in the mood for his remarks. He only laughed, which made my blood boil even more.

Before I could greet my parents, my mother started yelling. Her voice filled the spacious foyer, echoing off the high ceilings and marble floors, making it impossible to ignore. But I tried. I let her scolding wash over me like a static wave while I stared into space, picturing all the different ways I might *kill Julian* for ratting me out. I caught a glimpse of my father standing off to the side, arms crossed, looking disappointed. He often left the berating to Mom, content to add a solemn nod or a heavy sigh now and then.

"Are you even listening, Madeline?!" my mom screamed, exasperated.

I hated how they set these impossibly high standards for me. It was never enough to just be a normal teenager—I had to be perfect. I had to attend

every social function, look immaculate, maintain high grades, and essentially present myself as a model daughter. But *I'm not perfect*. Nobody is.

"Yes, Mom, it will be fine, I already got a tutor," I finally managed, trying to keep my voice even.

"A tutor? Do you know how that looks for us, Madeline?" she shot back sharply, stepping forward in her heels that clicked against the pristine floor.

I stared at her, feeling the pressure behind my eyes. She looked impeccable, as always, hair styled, wearing a tailored dress, every inch the image of a perfect trophy wife. But her eyes were cold, disapproving.

"I thought you were supposed to be the smart one," she said right before walking over to Julian. She draped an arm around his shoulders with a proud smile. "Well done, sweetie, a B. Maybe you could teach your sister a thing or two."

It was *official*. I hated my family. Actually, that was putting it mildly. At that moment, I hated my *life*. The only good thing I had left was Sam.

Life used to be fun and carefree, or at least that's how it felt when I was younger. As far back as I can remember, I had it all—great friends, pretty clothes, people who admired me, parents who spoiled me with anything I wanted. But as I got older, all those privileges came with impossible expectations. I wasn't allowed to do anything that didn't fit into their perfect mold. No "wasteful" hobbies, no sports that might get in the way of academics, no free time that could lead to a social scandal. They wanted me to get straight A's, *look pretty*, be the head cheerleader dating the quarterback, like some sort of miserable trophy wife in training. *Just like my mom*.

I used to love art. *I still do*. From the time I was a little girl, I adored painting, sketching, and anything that let my imagination run free. It came naturally to me, like breathing. But my parents brushed it off as a frivolous pastime. They limited when and where I could practice, eventually confining it to my bedroom. They never said it outright, but the message was clear: being a perfect daughter meant focusing on things they *approved* of, and art wasn't one of them.

I stormed off to my room, ignoring Julian's smug grin. My door slammed behind me, reverberating through the silent hallway. I tossed my bag onto the plush carpet, kicked off my shoes, and hopped into my private

bathroom for a quick, scalding shower that did little to wash away the day's frustrations. Steam fogged up the mirror, obscuring my reflection, which was a relief. I didn't want to look at my own face, filled with bitterness and exhaustion.

After my nighttime routine—a halfhearted one, because I was too drained to care—I threw myself onto my bed. The sheets felt cold against my skin, but I pulled the blanket over me and stared up at the ceiling. *I started wondering what life is like for people like Brooke.* Maybe people who have no name to uphold, no endless demands hovering over their heads. It must be nice to be a nobody sometimes, free of absurdly high expectations and free of a reputation that could unravel at any moment.

It sounds like a dream. A nice, free, carefree dream.

Eventually, sleep crept in, though my mind was still clouded with anger. Art, Sam, the humiliating tutor sessions, the reality that I got an F... everything swirled in my thoughts. Tomorrow would be another day, another chance for my parents to remind me how I'm failing to live up to their impossible standards. The only small comfort was that I'd made it through this one without completely losing my sanity. But deep inside, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that things were only going to get worse.

CHAPTER FIVE

BROOKE

This was the only day I seriously considered skipping school. Thursday. *The day I dreaded, the day I had to tutor Madeline Hayes.* My alarm blared at its usual time, but instead of rolling out of bed and preparing for the day with my usual sense of responsibility, I just laid there, eyes shut, willing time to stand still. My mind had spent half the night spinning out possibilities for how badly this could all go. In some of those anxious scenarios, I endured Madeline's relentless ridicule until I finally burst into tears and fled; in others, I shouted at her, my frustration morphing into a moment of angry humiliation.

I'd only slept for about four hours, and my body groaned in protest when I finally forced myself to climb out of bed. I dragged my feet to the bathroom, turning on the shower in hopes the warm water would rinse away my nerves. Steam filled the air, fogging the mirror. I tried to calm myself with a few deep breaths, but my stomach still tensed at the thought of facing Madeline this afternoon—at *her* house, of all places.

When I got downstairs, I could barely eat breakfast. My appetite was as absent as my courage. My dad shot me a concerned look, but I waved him off with a tight smile. I couldn't explain that I was freaking out because *today* I had to tutor the most intimidating, entitled person in school. *Sometimes I wonder if other people overthink things as much as I do.* Maybe my dad had his own worries, but he was probably too busy to notice mine, and in that moment, I was grateful for the lack of interrogation.

Has Madeline thought about today? If she did, it was probably only for a split second, maybe just enough to remember I was supposed to show up. She likely didn't lose any sleep over it, certainly not the way I did. *Who am I kidding?* She might have even forgotten I exist, let alone that we're meeting. That realization brought a twinge of annoyance I couldn't quite shake.

The school day felt like it dragged on for an eternity, each hour crawling forward while the dread in my chest coiled tighter. I sat in chemistry class—ironically the very subject causing all this trouble—trying to focus, but my brain was stuck on the same endless loop: *Madeline, tutoring, her mansion, my potential humiliation*. Even my favorite subject couldn't distract me from the tension gnawing at my thoughts.

Eventually, the final bell rang, and the moment I'd been dreading arrived. *I had to make my way to Madeline's house*. I walked briskly out of the school, ignoring a couple of acquaintances who tried to wave me over to chat. I just gave them a nod and hurried to my car. Once I was settled in the driver's seat, I tried putting on some music to calm me down—a soft, acoustic track that usually soothed my nerves. But my heartbeat still hammered with anticipation.

During the drive, I found my mind drifting into a bizarre mix of fear and... excitement? It was so strange, so illogical, that I almost wanted to shake myself. *What could possibly be exciting about tutoring Madeline?* Maybe the unknown always sparked a little adrenaline. Or maybe I was just plain nervous, and it was twisting itself into something else. The entire way, I kept tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, occasionally peering into the rearview mirror to see if I appeared as anxious as I felt. The roads were mostly empty, a bit of a blessing, so at least I didn't have to battle through traffic. After about fifteen minutes of driving past large, well-manicured lawns, I reached the imposing iron gate that guarded Madeline's property.

That gate itself was probably bigger than my entire garage. I paused, taking a deep breath, then rolled down my window to press the bell. A static crackle buzzed through the intercom before an unmistakably haughty voice filtered through.

"*Who is this?*" Madeline asked, and even through the small speaker, I could detect her bored, dismissive tone.

I blinked in disbelief. *She told me to come, and now she's acting like she doesn't know me?* That's precisely the sort of thing that drove me nuts about her. "*It's me, Brooke,*" I said, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

"*Who?*"

I felt my annoyance sharpen. Did she have some short-term memory problem, or was she just messing with me? "*Brooke Winters, your new chemistry tutor,*" I repeated, more agitated this time.

Silence lingered on the other side of the intercom, and I felt my stomach churn. But then, mercifully, the gate began to open with a metallic groan. I drove in slowly, marveling at the absurdly long driveway. The gravel crunched under my tires, and the entire path radiated wealth and perfection. *I knew she lived in a big house, but this was a full-on mansion.* The fountain in the center of the circular drive sparkled with water jets spraying gracefully into the air. It was so ornate, I half expected marble statues or cherubs to be perched along its edge. The neatly trimmed hedges were shaped with surgical precision, and perfectly symmetrical rows of flowers flanked either side of the driveway. Everything looked meticulously maintained, as though an entire team of gardeners spent hours ensuring a single twig never fell out of place.

Even the house itself, with its huge arched windows and grand columns, seemed to boast its superiority. *I couldn't help but feel like I was stepping into a movie set.* And in that instant, I felt smaller, more insecure. I adjusted the rearview mirror again, checking if I had any stray hairs or smudged eyeliner. I doubted Madeline would notice or care, but I still wanted to avoid appearing sloppy.

As I got closer to the end of the driveway, I finally caught sight of Madeline standing in the open doorway of her mansion. She wore a casual but stylish outfit—leggings that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe, and a fitted top that matched her sleek ponytail. Her posture was relaxed, yet there was something about the way she rested her hand on the doorframe that gave off *that* vibe. She was the reigning queen of this place, and she knew it.

My heart raced, and my palms started sweating against the steering wheel. I swallowed hard, annoyed at my own reaction. *It's not like I was scared of her,* though she did have a reputation for cutting remarks and icy stares. And I definitely didn't *like* her. But my body refused to cooperate; my heart thumped like I was about to walk on stage in front of thousands of people. I parked the car, turned off the engine, and sat for a second, willing myself to stop freaking out. A breath in, a breath out.

Finally, I opened my door and stepped onto the gravel. The crisp autumn air made me shiver. I slammed the car door shut behind me, immediately worrying about whether the sound was too loud or if she'd think I was clumsy. *I just wanted to make the best possible impression—or at least a*

decent one—so I could finish the tutoring and get out of there without incident.

I started walking toward her, each step feeling heavier than the last. Something in my stomach was doing somersaults, but I forced a tight, polite smile. *She didn't wave. She just stood there.* Her expression was unreadable, and the silence between us stretched until I finally reached the steps leading up to her front door.

My thoughts were a jumbled mess: *Why am I so worked up? Is she going to insult me right away? What if I mess up somehow?* I tried to remind myself that I was here for a simple reason: to help her pass chemistry. But as I felt my cheeks grow warm and my pulse pound in my ears, I realized *nothing* about this day was going to feel simple.

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CHAPTER SIX

MADELINE

Normally, I'd be in my room, drawing to clear my head. On any other day, I would have sprawled on the floor, pencils and colored markers scattered around me, letting the lines and shapes flow until I forgot whatever was bothering me. But today, I just couldn't. My mind felt too jumpy, like a constant buzzing under my skin, and every time I tried to pick up my pencil, my hand trembled enough to ruin any straight line I attempted.

There was this restlessness I just couldn't shake. Like an itch under the surface of my skin that refused to go away no matter what I did. I paced around my room for what felt like ages, staring at half-finished sketches and canvases propped against the walls, none of them inviting enough to calm my nerves. Eventually, I gave up on trying to create anything and decided to go downstairs.

My parents were still at work, and Julian was at football practice with Sam. The entire house felt oddly quiet—normally, I'd relish having the place to myself, but today, the silence pressed in on me, reminding me of what was coming. *Brooke.* My new tutor. I'd told her to show up at my house at five, but I didn't expect myself to be so...anxious? Or whatever this feeling was.

I flopped onto the couch in the foyer, mindlessly scrolling through my phone, half-watching the clock and half-begging time to slow down. The second I heard the bell of the gate ring, I jumped up to answer. My heart gave a jolt, but I forced myself to stay cool. I knew it was Brooke, but I sure as hell didn't want *her* to know that I'd been practically waiting by the speaker. I had a certain reputation to maintain, and restlessly hovering around for my tutor didn't really help with that.

I pressed the intercom button and put on my best bored voice. "*Who is this?*" I asked, listening to the slight hiss of static. Even though I knew it

was Brooke, I had to feign disinterest.

I wondered how Brooke felt about all of this. Would she feel restless too? Would she care at all, or was she rolling her eyes at the thought of having to come here and teach *me* of all people? I tried not to care, but deep down, a tiny voice inside me kept prodding, asking questions I didn't want to answer.

Once I opened the gate, I decided to wait for her in the doorway. The grand double doors behind me loomed like a statement of how ridiculously large this house was. I'd seen it a million times, but now it felt too quiet, too still, as if the house itself was holding its breath for Brooke's arrival.

As I stood there, I watched her drive down the driveway. I almost did a double-take when I saw her car: a vintage black convertible with red leather seats. The top was down, and the wind caught her wavy brown hair, making it flow around her shoulders like something out of an old Hollywood film. I blinked in surprise. I had never expected *Brooke Winters*—the quiet, studious girl from chemistry class—to have that kind of taste, or the money to match. It looked kind of expensive, and I found myself wondering how someone like her could afford that.

Yet, there she was, cruising up to my place with her sunglasses on, exuding this effortless cool vibe that made her seem like she belonged somewhere else entirely, maybe in a scenic coastal town or on a road trip across the country. And, *as much as it pains me*, I had to admit she actually looked... *hot*. Not in a nerdy way, either. Something about the way she carried herself in that moment was unexpectedly confident.

A flicker of realization hit me: *I noticed that feeling, that restlessness, was gone.* As soon as she showed up, the tension in my stomach melted away, leaving me strangely calm. That couldn't possibly be related to *her*, right? It had to be a coincidence, just my mood changing because I had a distraction now.

She parked her car and got out, slamming the door behind her. *She walked up to me a little too fast*, her posture rigid, and when she stopped right in front of me, I saw the annoyance etched into her features. Her gaze locked onto mine—she had to tilt her head slightly because she was shorter than me—and I could feel how agitated she was before she even opened her mouth.

“*Who? Seriously?*” she snapped, clearly pissed.

If she was trying to intimidate me, it wasn't working—not that I'd let her see any sign of discomfort. But I couldn't ignore the fact that standing this close to her felt... odd. My heart gave a weird flutter. She had this intensity about her, something that made me feel like the room had tilted just a bit, like I was caught off balance. *I hated that sensation.* I didn't want to think about why she could affect me like that, so I shoved it aside.

"What? I just forgot we were supposed to meet today. Some of us actually have lives, you know," I said coolly, lifting my chin a fraction.

Brooke scoffed, rolling her eyes so hard I was sure she saw her own skull. "Right. Let's just get this over with," she retorted, sounding fed up already.

For a moment, the sunlight streaming behind her caught her eyes, and I realized they weren't purely brown. There was a dark green ring around her pupils, something you could only see if you were close enough. I'd never noticed that before. It was... beautiful, an unexpected complexity. And it irritated me, because part of me was fascinated, and I *really* didn't want to be fascinated by *Brooke Winters*.

"Great, we finally agree on something," I said, letting out a mocking laugh. I smirked, enjoying how her face tensed. There was a small flash of hurt—or was it frustration?—in her eyes that only fueled my desire to push her buttons. I *always* get what I want, after all.

I took a few steps back and motioned for her to follow me into the house, heading toward my bedroom on the second floor. I could practically feel her eyes burning holes in my back, the tension radiating off her like an electric current. I tried to hide my smug satisfaction, but a tiny grin tugged at my lips.

After about a minute of walking through the polished marble foyer and past the winding staircase, I realized Brooke had stopped. *She was standing in the middle of the hallway, looking around at everything like she couldn't believe it.* The high ceilings, the crystal chandelier hanging overhead, the elaborate artwork my parents insisted on displaying... it was a lot to take in for someone who'd never been here before.

"What's wrong? Did you forget how to walk?" I asked, crossing my arms. A trace of impatience laced my voice. Maybe I was showing off, or maybe I just wanted to see her reaction.

"You actually live here?" she asked in disbelief, her eyes scanning the gold accents on the picture frames and the pristine white marble floors.

"Never seen a real house before, have you?" I shot back, arching an eyebrow.

Then Brooke said something I definitely didn't expect. Her whole demeanor shifted, and she straightened, looking me right in the eye. Her posture turned more confident, and the annoyance in her gaze became something else entirely—almost challenging.

"Do you always have to be such an insufferable bitch?" She sounded amused, but there was an undercurrent of real frustration.

I blinked, surprised and... oddly impressed. So *this* was the real Brooke? The one who wasn't too scared to talk back to me? Or was it an act, some last-ditch attempt to convince me that she didn't care what I thought?

Either way, she was right. I usually *am* an insufferable bitch. That's just how I've learned to handle people, especially people who think they can stand on the same level as me.

"Sorry, just can't seem to help it," I said with a dramatic shrug, raising my hands in a mock surrender. My voice dripped with sarcasm, and I turned back around, doing my best not to let Brooke see the small grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. In a weird way, it was almost... refreshing to have someone stand up to me. *"Must be a genetic trait,"* I added under my breath, thinking of Julian's own sharp tongue.

She let out a short laugh, rolling her eyes, but she looked genuinely irritated. Her eyebrows drew together, and for a second, I thought she might just drop her bags and leave. But she exhaled, letting that tension pass, and followed me in silence toward my bedroom. The hallway seemed longer than usual. Maybe it was the awkwardness stretching it out, or maybe the strange vibe between us made every step feel loaded with some new tension.

Finally, we reached my door. I pushed it open and stepped inside, my sanctuary—except it didn't feel so private anymore. The walls were decorated with minimalistic art my parents had picked out, but in one corner, I had my secret stash of my own sketches piled next to the desk. I quickly glanced that way, hoping none of the pages were out in plain sight.

I *sat down on my bed* before she could say anything, crossing my legs so I could watch her with a slight smirk. She lingered by the doorway, still

taking it all in, and I found myself curious about the thoughts racing behind those inquisitive eyes. Did she see something here that intrigued her? Did it match whatever expectations she had about my life?

I *couldn't read her entirely*, but I could see she was annoyed. Her jaw tightened a little, and she set her bag down with more force than necessary, as if she were trying to keep her temper in check. An uncomfortable silence settled between us, almost tangible.

Even so, part of me couldn't ignore how alive I suddenly felt with her standing here, in my space, confronting me. *That restlessness* I'd been wrestling with all day was gone, replaced by a different kind of tension, one that I didn't know whether to fight or welcome. I tried to bury the thought that maybe I liked the spark of challenge in her eyes. I reminded myself that I was Madeline Hayes—I got what I wanted, I was in control. No matter what this tutoring session brought, I refused to let Brooke Winters see me as anything less than the confident, untouchable person I was supposed to be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BROOKE

Art? Madeline Hayes likes art? I never would have guessed in a million years that the queen of our cheer squad had a serious artistic side, let alone such a bold and surprising talent. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the pieces hanging on her bedroom walls. The drawings, the paintings, each one signed with *M.G. Hayes* in a neat little flourish at the corner. Every image drew me in—wild colors blending in a hazy skyline, a portrait of a woman's face highlighted in smoky charcoal, surreal plants twisting around each other in breathtaking detail. They were actually *good*, not some mediocre attempt. It looked professional, like maybe she could hang them in a gallery someday if she wanted to.

For a moment, I felt like I was standing in a different world, somewhere far from the typical school dramas or my own relentless studying. Maybe I didn't know the real Madeline Hayes after all. The thought unsettled me. She was already so confusing—arrogant, popular, guarded, and yet somehow more complicated than I ever imagined. *Did I even want to figure her out?* I honestly wasn't sure.

"So, what do you think?" she asked, excitement clear in her voice. Her eyes were bright, almost like she was a little kid waiting to hear my reaction, which felt oddly vulnerable for her.

"It's not at all what I expected," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, though I was still in awe of the colorful chaos surrounding me. "I didn't exactly peg you for the artist type."

"Most people don't," she replied with a small shrug. "I'm not just all looks, you know. I have other interests besides cheerleading."

There was something about the way she said it. Her tone was open and genuine rather than defensive or sarcastic. It struck me that maybe she was used to people assuming she had no depth. Maybe she *hated* that people only saw the pretty, popular side of her—and then she turned around and

presented herself in a way that only reinforced that stereotype. The contradiction left me strangely breathless, like I was seeing a side of her I'd never expected to witness.

I didn't know how to react to such honesty. My brain spun, searching for some appropriate response, but everything felt clumsy. I'd never been great at dealing with people, anyway. I was more comfortable buried in my books, or lost in my own solitary routines. *Which is probably why I don't have any friends*, I thought wryly.

"Ahem... let's, uhm... start with chemistry," I mumbled awkwardly, struggling to shift the conversation.

She nodded, but her eyes lingered on me, like she was curious about whether I was genuinely impressed or just pretending. The intensity in her gaze made my stomach do a funny little flip.

I cleared my throat again and sat down beside her on the bed, opening the thick chemistry textbook already splayed out on the rumpled blankets. The mattress dipped a little under my weight, and the faint scent of her perfume—something floral and sweet—wrapped around me, making it hard to focus on the words in front of me. I took a slow, calming breath.

About five minutes into my explanation, I noticed Madeline wasn't even looking at the book. She was staring at me, not just casually, but with her eyebrows slightly furrowed, as if trying to decode something mysterious.

"What?" I asked, confused, letting the sentence I'd been reading trail off.

"Is studying all you ever do?" she said, half-incredulous.

"Wha—why? What do you mean?"

"How do you know all this stuff?" Her lips curled into a teasing smirk, and she leaned back, crossing her arms lightly. "Are you locked in your room all day?"

"No, I am not," I said, trying to keep a firm tone. "I'm just good at studying. Unlike you, apparently, which is why we should continue."

She ignored my attempt to redirect her attention and cocked her head. "Tell me then—what is it that Brooke Winters does all day besides being a nerd?"

The word *nerd* stung, even though I already suspected she thought of me that way. I hated that she had no issue throwing the insult around, especially considering *she's* the one who needed *my* help. But I tried to stay calm.

“No, we should really keep going,” I said, voice clipped. “We have a lot to do.”

“No.” Her arms folded across her chest in a resolute, final manner.

I blinked. “No? What do you mean, *no*?”

“I mean no,” she said simply. “We’re not continuing until you tell me what you do every day.”

“Why are you so interested in my life all of a sudden?” I asked, my irritation mounting.

She paused, her gaze flicking momentarily to the paintings on the wall before landing back on me. “I’m just curious, that’s all.”

There was something about the set of her jaw, something stubborn and yet strangely genuine. I felt the prick of frustration—and something else I couldn’t name. It made my face feel hot, and my chest tightened in ways that were unfamiliar. I hated it, but I also felt a tiny spark of... I don’t know. Maybe it was intrigue.

“Fine, if you really want to know.” I sighed, setting the textbook down beside me.

“I do,” she said again, more softly this time. No sarcasm, no bite. Just an earnest interest that almost disarmed me.

“After school, I study for a bit,” I began hesitantly, “sometimes I go to the gym, then I watch Netflix or read a book before bed. Not very exciting, I know.”

She looked at me like I’d just announced I was an alien from another planet. Her eyes widened slightly, her mouth parting in surprise, which quickly turned into an amused grin.

“What is it?” I asked, face warming.

“Okay, first of all... you go to the gym?” she said, obviously struggling not to laugh.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” I answered, lifting my chin. “You can’t tell?”

She snorted, a real, unguarded laugh. “Not really, no.”

I rolled my eyes, but a small grin snuck onto my lips. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Second of all, the studying and reading, yeah, I can see that,” she continued, “but Netflix? That, I cannot believe.”

“Well, you better start believing it. Because it’s the truth.”

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “Prove it. What’s your favorite show?”

I felt a pang of apprehension. *If I tell her it's Game of Thrones*, she'll have a field day. I imagined her smug face, calling me a *super-nerd* for loving dragons, medieval politics, and epic battles. My gaze flicked around her room, searching for an alternative. Some random show name popped into my head—*Gossip Girl*, a show I could totally picture Madeline starring in.

"Gossip Girl," I said confidently, trying to keep a straight face.

She actually burst out laughing. It was a musical sound, equal parts amusement and disbelief. "No, it's not," she said, wiping a nonexistent tear from her eye. "That was a decent try, but I can see right through you. Now tell me the truth. I wouldn't lie to you."

Her words made me pause. *I wouldn't lie to you*. It was such a strange thing to say, coming from her. It felt oddly personal, like she was trying to form some sort of connection.

I swallowed, feeling my face grow hot again. "Okay, okay, fine. I'll tell you. It's Game of Thrones."

She smirked, clearly satisfied. "See? I *knew* you were a nerd."

My jaw tightened. "You know, I really hate that word."

"Noted," she said with a lazy grin.

"Alright," I said, flipping open the chemistry book again. "Now that you've pried into my personal life, can we please get back to studying?"

"Fine," she said with a dismissive shrug. "Whatever you want."

I started explaining molecular bonds and electron configurations, pointing to diagrams and occasionally glancing over to see if she was at least pretending to follow along. For a few minutes, it was okay—she nodded here and there, asked a short question. But then I noticed her expression drifting, like she was physically in the room but her mind was a million miles away. Her gaze would slip to the corner of her desk where her pencils were scattered, or to the paintings on the wall, or sometimes to me.

I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but it was definitely not about protons or electrons. As her gaze lingered on my profile, I felt myself flush again, though I tried to hide it by tapping on the book with my pen.

I just wished she'd focus. Yet, there was a part of me that couldn't help being a little curious about what was going on in her head. Was she thinking about her next drawing, or maybe something else in her life that was weighing her down? And why had she shown me that *genuine* side of

herself when she talked about her art, then snapped right back to the confident, almost cocky persona that everyone knew her for?

I pushed the question aside. I was here to help her study, to save her from failing chemistry. *I had no business trying to figure out the mystery of Madeline Hayes.* No matter how captivating those paintings on the wall were, or how unexpectedly she seemed to open up.

So I cleared my throat and repeated the last part of my explanation, hoping that maybe, just maybe, I could anchor her attention back to the periodic table instead of wherever her thoughts were drifting off to. All the while, I couldn't ignore the stubborn beat of my heart, or the strange, electric feeling settling in the room. I told myself it was just nerves, and that I just wanted to be done with this session, so I could leave and pretend things were back to normal.

But I knew there was no going back to normal. Not when Madeline Hayes was turning out to be so much more than I'd ever imagined.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MADELINE

While Brooke was trying to explain acids and bases to me, I couldn't stop focusing on one strange realization: *I actually kind of liked talking to her*. Not that I *liked* her, obviously, because I didn't. And it was painfully obvious that she didn't like me either. But maybe that was exactly why it felt so different. She wasn't here because she wanted something from me, or because she felt obligated to pretend she liked me. She was here because she *had* to be. Something about that made it more honest than any other conversation I'd had in a while.

Everyone else in my life either wanted some form of approval, or they wanted access to what I could offer. Half the time, they were just using me to feel better about themselves or to climb some imaginary social ladder. But Brooke didn't care about any of that. There were no forced smiles, no empty compliments, no giggling at my every word. She didn't hesitate to tell me exactly what she thought of me, good or bad, and it was oddly refreshing. It was as if, for once, nobody was dancing around my ego.

I glanced at her and saw the determination in her eyes as she delved deeper into the chapter. Her voice rose and fell in an almost rhythmic way while she explained acids, bases, pH values, and all that other stuff I had never really bothered to learn. Her hair kept slipping down her shoulder, and every once in a while she'd tuck it back behind her ear, looking so focused that I doubted she was even aware she was doing it.

I caught myself staring at her. It was then that I noticed the tiny bump on her nose, a feature so small you'd never see it unless you were up close. I felt a strange pull in my chest, like curiosity tugging me forward. I told myself it was just me being bored, but a nagging voice in the back of my head insisted it was something more.

She must have felt my eyes on her because she looked up, confusion flickering across her face. Then she let out a short, almost nervous laugh.

“What?” she asked. “Do I have something stuck in my teeth or something?”

I hesitated for a moment, thinking about how to respond, then blurted out, “Why don’t you have friends?”

Her face shifted immediately. Whatever calm had been there disappeared in an instant, and her expression turned guarded.

“Excuse me? Listen, Madeline, I’m here to help you. You constantly asking me questions about my personal life is not helping me help you.”

I’d only meant it as a passing curiosity. She talked about her daily life the other day, but she never mentioned meeting anyone or hanging out. I was merely wondering about it, but she acted like I’d stepped on her soul. *She* was the one overreacting. Had she forgotten who she was talking to? *I am Madeline Hayes.*

“Why are you so stuck up all the time?” I snapped, my temper flaring.

She scoffed and stood up from the bed so quickly that it almost startled me. “Me? Stuck up?” Her voice trembled with anger. “Have you ever looked in a mirror? Oh, wait. Who am I kidding? That’s all you do. Maybe that’s why you’re failing chemistry.”

I could feel my pulse beating in my neck. Her words stung more than I wanted to admit. She had no idea what I dealt with day in and day out in this house, this family, this life. Who did she think she was, talking to me that way?

I shot up from the bed, too, closing the space between us in a couple of quick steps. We were inches apart now, so close that I could feel the warmth of her breath near my collarbone. My heart pounded, and I hated how my body betrayed me by reacting that way.

I stared straight into her eyes. “Get the hell out of my house. Now.” My voice dropped low, cold, final.

“Gladly,” she said, her own anger radiating off her. There was no sign of fear or intimidation in her gaze. If anything, she looked ready to push back if I dared say anything else.

She stormed out of my room, mumbling something under her breath. I couldn’t make out the words, but the frustration in her tone was unmistakable. I stood there, fists clenched, as I heard her footsteps fade down the hallway.

After she left, I felt... something. Something uncomfortable and heavy, like a weight lodged in my chest. Annoyance, definitely, and frustration, of course, but there was also this nagging sensation that I had messed up. That I was the one who'd pushed it too far. *But why should I feel guilty?* She was the one who overreacted. She was the one who'd gotten all sensitive about a harmless question.

I shook my head, trying to clear the thought. It was ridiculous. I didn't care about Brooke Winters or her feelings, not even a little.

(Right...?)

We didn't speak after that.

Days passed in a tense silence, at least on my end. I kept expecting some text from Mr. Sinclair telling me that my tutor was refusing to continue or some lecture from Brooke in the hallway about how ungrateful I was. But there was nothing. Just a whole lot of emptiness whenever I thought about it for too long.

Finally, I did something unthinkable: I went to chemistry class. I was hardly ever on time, but today I walked in right before the bell rang. Sam had saved me a seat as usual, but my eyes drifted to the chair next to Brooke, which was empty. On impulse, I slid into the seat beside her.

I could feel the tension radiating off her the moment I sat down. She stared at the board, refusing to even acknowledge my presence. Fine. Two could play that game. The entire class passed like that, with both of us pretending the other didn't exist.

The weird part was that nobody else seemed to notice. Everyone was busy whispering about the upcoming senior ski trip, rummaging through their textbooks, or rolling their eyes at Mr. Sinclair's monotone lecture. I focused on my notes, which mostly amounted to scribbles in the margins, while Brooke took furious, detailed notes as though her life depended on it.

Right before the bell, Mr. Sinclair cleared his throat for an announcement. "Don't forget about the senior ski trip. We leave in five days at seven in the morning." Then he looked right at me. "Don't be late."

I bit my lip to keep from snarking back, but I couldn't help it. "I won't be," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

That's when I heard it—a soft, mocking laugh. I turned my head toward the sound. *Brooke*. She was looking away from me by the time I caught sight of her, but there was no mistaking who had laughed.

SHE was mocking ME? Unbelievable.

The bell rang, and everyone started packing up. I tossed my notebook into my bag, glancing at Brooke with narrowed eyes. “Are you going?” I asked, making no effort to hide the judgment in my tone.

She paused, then just let out a quiet *pff*, as if to say: *Why are you even talking to me?* Her expression said it all—annoyed, dismissive, and something else I couldn’t quite read. Without a word, she slung her bag over her shoulder and walked out.

A small part of me wanted to laugh it off, but instead I felt a pang of something I refused to label. Usually, people were the ones who felt nervous around me, not the other way around. I was the one who decided whether to ignore them or grace them with my attention. That was how it had always been.

But Brooke didn’t care about any of that. She barely bothered to mask her irritation, and then she just... walked away. No dramatic insults, no last-minute jabs. Just a cold, final exit that left me standing there like I was the one who didn’t matter.

I found myself scoffing out loud as I watched her leave. “Wow. So polite. Remind me to send you a thank-you note for that delightful response.” My words dripped with sarcasm, echoing uselessly in the nearly empty classroom.

She didn’t turn around. She just kept on walking.

Rude bitch.

Except, for some reason, the anger in my chest didn’t burn as hot as I wanted it to. It felt muddled, twisted with that same unsettled feeling I’d had when she stormed out of my house. I stuffed my binder into my backpack, cursing under my breath. She’d see soon enough that nobody treated Madeline Hayes like an afterthought.

I just had no idea how to make that point clear without looking like I actually cared what she thought of me. So instead, I gritted my teeth, lifted my chin, and told myself I didn’t give a damn. Because if there was one thing I *didn’t* want to do, it was admit that maybe... it bothered me more than it should.

PART TWO

Crossing Roads

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CHAPTER NINE

BROOKE

Are you going?

Those three small words kept echoing in my head like a broken record. Madeline's voice, that perfectly practiced blend of boredom and entitlement, had lingered in my mind far longer than I wanted to admit. I lay in bed that night, staring at my ceiling, wondering why I couldn't just dismiss her question like I'd dismissed everything else about her.

Pff, who does she think she is? First, she insults me, then pretends to actually be interested in my life, acting like she cares, only to insult me again. It was this never-ending cycle of mind games with her—one moment showing a glimpse of something genuine, the next reminding me exactly why I couldn't stand her.

"Why don't you have friends?"

That question still burned. How could she ask me that? She didn't even know who I was before Mr. Sinclair forced us together. She just assumed I was some lonely loser with no social life. It was true, but she had no way of knowing that. The question itself revealed so much about her—how she viewed the world, how she categorized people, how she measured worth.

And like she has real friends? Please. All she has are her brainless Barbie dolls, always ready at her disposal. Victoria, Audrey, Sophie—they followed her around like she was their personal sun, orbiting her, desperate for her approval. You call that friendship? At least I didn't have fake people in my life pretending to care about me just to climb some invisible social ladder.

Every morning I woke up, I had to mentally prepare myself for the possibility of seeing her in class. The way she carried herself through the hallways, like the entire school was her personal runway. The way other students parted for her like she was royalty. And now, after everything that happened during our tutoring session, after all the tension and arguments,

she had the nerve to sit next to me and ask if I'm going on the senior ski trip, like we're friends or something.

Every time I thought she couldn't get any worse, she somehow did.

I pulled myself out of bed and walked to my closet, where my snowboard was propped against the wall. I ran my fingers over the glossy surface, remembering the feeling of gliding down a mountain, the rush of cold air against my face, the absolute freedom. The senior ski trip had been on my mind since freshman year, a bright spot I could look forward to. A chance to escape the monotony of school life, to reconnect with something I loved.

I already assumed Madeline was going. She's rich, we live in Colorado, and her family probably has their own skiing cabin up in the mountains, complete with a personal chef and hot tub. The Hayes family name was practically synonymous with privilege in this town. I'd bet money that Madeline had her own custom designer ski gear that she'd worn maybe once or twice.

I love skiing and snowboarding.

It was one of the few pure joys I had left after mom died. I started out skiing but then switched to snowboarding as I got older, and I'm actually really good at it too. There was something about the balance required, the way you had to shift your weight and lean into turns, that just clicked with me. On the mountain, I wasn't the quiet girl who sat in the front of the class or the one who lost her mom too young. I was just free.

I wasn't going to let the fact that Madeline was going ruin this trip for me. I had been looking forward to this trip since I was a freshman. Five days away from home, away from the pressure of being perfect, away from the constant reminders of what I'd lost. Five days of just me, my board, and the mountain.

The night before the trip, I couldn't sleep. I kept checking and rechecking my packing list, making sure I had everything I needed. Extra socks, my thermal layers, my favorite beanie—the blue one my mom had given me for my fourteenth birthday, the last one I'd ever get from her. I'd worn it every time I went snowboarding since.

The morning we were leaving, we had to be on the bus at seven in the morning sharp. My alarm blared at five, though I'd been awake since four thirty, too excited and nervous to stay asleep. I got up and started packing my final items, making sure I had all my gear. I had my own snowboard and

snowboard boots. It was a lot to carry, so my dad helped me load it into his car before driving me to school.

The streets were still dark as we drove, the sky just beginning to lighten at the edges. My dad hummed along to the radio, some old song that used to make my mom roll her eyes and laugh. The memory made my chest ache in that familiar way, a pain I'd learned to live with.

I was one of the first people to arrive at school. The large coach bus was already waiting in the parking lot, its engine running, puffs of exhaust visible in the cold morning air. A few teachers milled around, checking clipboards and organizing luggage.

My dad helped me load my stuff into the bus, then gave me a big emotional hug goodbye. It was my first ski trip without him. My mom loved skiing. So did my dad. We always used to go on ski trips together, making some of the best memories on those trips. The three of us would race down the slopes, laughing, stopping for hot chocolate with extra whipped cream at the lodge.

I could see it kind of hurt my dad that I was going without him for the first time since my mom died. It hurt me too. It reminded me so much of my mom. The way she would wake us up early on ski days, already buzzing with excitement. The way she always insisted on one more run, even when the sun was setting and the slopes were emptying. The way she would reach over and adjust my goggles, making sure they fit just right.

"Be careful, okay?" my dad said to me while hugging me. His arms were tight around me, and I could feel the slight tremor in his hands. He was trying to be strong, but I knew this was hard for him too.

"I will, Dad," I replied, breathing in the familiar scent of his aftershave.

"Send me pictures. And you know you can call me whenever you want to talk about whatever, right?" His voice had that slight crack to it, the one that appeared whenever he was trying not to let his emotions show.

"Yes, Dad, I know. I will." I gave him one more squeeze before pulling away. If I stayed in his arms any longer, I might change my mind about going.

I got on the bus, waved my dad goodbye, and watched as he drove away, his car growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared around a corner. The emptiness in my chest expanded a little, but I pushed it down, reminding myself that I was going to have fun. That's what my mom would have wanted.

I chose a seat near the middle of the bus, not too far back where the rowdy kids would sit, but not too close to the front where the teachers would be keeping an eye on everyone. I put my AirPods in and started listening to some music, thinking about the trip. The slopes waiting for me, the feeling of fresh powder beneath my board, the crisp mountain air filling my lungs.

It was nice.

I felt at peace for the first time in a while. Just sitting there, having something really fun to look forward to. The music washed over me, and I closed my eyes, imagining the perfect blue sky above the mountain peaks, the rush of adrenaline as I carved my way down a steep run.

The closer it got to seven, the more people got on the bus. Each time the doors opened, a burst of cold air would rush in, along with the excited chatter of students. I kept my eyes on my phone, not really wanting to engage with anyone. Most of them wouldn't notice me anyway.

I noticed Sam and Julian arrived without Madeline and sat down next to each other a few rows behind me. Sam looked different without Madeline by his side, more relaxed, laughing easily with Julian. It was strange seeing him as just a regular guy rather than an extension of Madeline's social kingdom.

Madeline not sitting next to Sam. That's weird.

I hadn't expected that. They were always together, her arm hooked through his, his hand resting on her waist. The perfect couple, like something out of a high school movie. I wondered if they'd had a fight, or if she was just running late as usual.

Then Madeline's "friends" arrived.

Audrey Bennett. Your typical skinny blonde cheerleader who still thinks it's cool to have an eating disorder and pretend to be a dumb blonde. Although she probably wasn't pretending. She had straight blonde hair and brown eyes, always perfectly styled and made up, even at seven in the morning. She walked with that bouncy step that seemed calculated to draw attention to her petite frame.

Victoria Langston. Dark-skinned, short, always wore these pretty braids, and had dark brown eyes, which was actually really striking. But that was all that was pretty about her, since she might be even more of a bitch than Madeline. I'd once heard her reduce a freshman to tears just for accidentally

bumping into her in the hallway. She carried herself with the same entitled confidence as Madeline, though hers seemed more deliberately cultivated.

And lastly, Sophie Lawson. She was pretty tall for a Latina. She was from Argentina. She had wavy black hair and beautiful dark green eyes. She was actually kind of nice. I never quite understood why she was part of their friend group.

Actually, I did. She just desperately wanted to be popular, like everyone else.

Not me, though.

I was perfectly fine flying under the radar.

No one knowing me meant being able to do everything I wanted without ever having to worry about what other people might think of me. I could read my books during lunch, answer questions in class without being labeled a know-it-all, skip school events without anyone noticing. There was a freedom in invisibility that I'd come to appreciate.

I immediately noticed Madeline wasn't with her friends either.

Victoria sat down next to Sophie. Audrey sat down next to some other girl I had seen before but didn't know the name of. She was in my English class, always doodling in her notebook instead of taking notes.

I checked my phone. 6:57 AM. Three minutes to departure.

She told Mr. Sinclair she wouldn't be late, but it was already three minutes to seven. She'd made such a point of telling him she wouldn't be late, with that typical eye roll and smirk. Maybe she wasn't coming anymore. Maybe she'd changed her mind, or her parents had whisked her off on some exclusive vacation to Aspen or Vail instead.

I thought the idea of that would make me happy. But to my big surprise, it didn't. Maybe because I didn't know anything for sure yet. Or maybe because some small, irrational part of me was actually curious about what would happen if she were here too. I pushed the thought away, annoyed at myself for even caring.

The bus was almost full now. I could hear Mr. Sinclair outside, checking names off his list. Two of the other teachers were doing a final count of luggage and equipment. It was really happening. We were really going.

Finally, at exactly seven, Madeline walked onto the bus. Was she late because she overslept, or did she deliberately choose to make an entrance? Who am I kidding. It's definitely both. She had that carefully crafted look of

someone who wanted to appear as though they'd just rolled out of bed looking perfect, but had actually spent an hour achieving the effect.

Her blonde hair fell in those perfect waves around her face, and she wore a designer ski jacket that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. Despite the early hour, she had subtle makeup on that highlighted her cheekbones and made her blue eyes pop. She carried a small backpack that I was certain contained nothing of actual use for the trip.

The second she got on the bus, we both started looking around for empty seats. The noise level had dropped significantly as everyone watched Madeline make her way down the aisle. She had that effect on rooms—making everything else fade into the background. I saw her gaze sweep over her usual crowd, noting the lack of available seats. Sam and Julian were together, her friends were paired off.

And when we both eventually realized the only empty seat was next to me, we immediately locked eyes.

A shock went through my entire body. That's what her gaze felt like. It was electric, intense, like touching a live wire. Time seemed to slow down for a second, and I couldn't look away even if I wanted to. I tried to keep my face neutral, to not show the strange mixture of dread and anticipation coursing through me.

She looked kind of pleased at first, relieved even. But that only lasted for a second. It was such a brief flicker that I might have imagined it. Then she had her signature judgmental resting bitch face on again as she made her way toward the empty seat next to me, and sat down. She didn't say anything at first, just set her backpack on the floor and checked her phone, like she was already bored by the whole situation.

"I thought you said you'd be on time," I said with a hint of sarcasm, unable to stop myself from breaking the silence. The words came out before I could think better of them.

She turned to me, one perfectly shaped eyebrow raised. "Oh, so now you're talking to me?"

The way she said it. The way she looked at me when she said it, she was angry, but also a bit hurt. Maybe even both. Her blue eyes flashed with an emotion I couldn't quite pin down. It wasn't the cold dismissal I was used to seeing from her. It was something more complicated, more raw.

Did I actually hurt Madeline Hayes?

How? She was supposed to be untouchable, impervious to anything I could say or do. I was nobody, and she was... well, she was Madeline Hayes. The idea that something I did had affected her was so bizarre that I didn't know how to process it.

The bus engine revved louder, and Mr. Sinclair called for everyone's attention from the front. We were about to leave, five days of mountain freedom ahead of us. And somehow, I'd be spending at least part of that time right next to the last person I ever expected to share this trip with.

How did I end up here?

I wondered, sneaking another glance at Madeline's profile as she pretended to be deeply interested in whatever was happening outside the window.

And why can't I stop thinking about the look in her eyes when she asked if I was talking to her?

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CHAPTER TEN

MADELINE

Four hours, six minutes, and twenty-three seconds. That's how long I sat next to Brooke Winters on that bus without speaking a single word to her. Not that I was counting or anything. The silence between us was... weird. Not uncomfortable exactly, but charged with something I couldn't quite name. Every now and then, our elbows would brush against each other when the bus hit a bump in the road, and I'd feel this strange jolt, like static electricity.

I spent the entire ride pretending to be asleep, or staring out the window, or scrolling mindlessly through my phone. Anything to avoid having to acknowledge her presence beside me. What was I supposed to say, anyway?

Sorry I was a bitch during our tutoring session? Sorry I asked why you don't have friends? Yeah, no. Madeline Hayes doesn't apologize, especially not to someone like Brooke Winters.

Besides, she didn't seem interested in talking either. The second I sat down, she put her AirPods back in and turned up her music so loud I could faintly hear it from where I sat. I couldn't make out what she was listening to, but it definitely wasn't the kind of mainstream pop that Victoria and Audrey obsessed over. Every so often, I'd catch her tapping her fingers against her thigh to the beat, her eyes closed, completely lost in whatever she was hearing.

I tried not to notice how peaceful she looked in those moments, how the tension seemed to drain from her face, softening the sharp edges of her usual guarded expression. It was annoying how she could just tune everything out like that, how she didn't seem to care what anyone thought of her. I've spent my entire life carefully curating what people think of me, and here was Brooke Winters, not giving a single damn.

At some point, I must have dozed off, because suddenly the bus was slowing down, and Mr. Sinclair was standing at the front, announcing our arrival. I blinked, disoriented, and realized with horror that my head had

been leaning against the window at an awkward angle. My neck ached, and I could feel a patch of drool at the corner of my mouth. *Great.* I quickly wiped it away, praying that Brooke hadn't noticed.

When I glanced over at her, she was already gathering her things, her back partially turned to me. Her hair had fallen forward, obscuring her face, so I couldn't tell if she'd seen my embarrassing nap posture or not. She didn't say anything, just stood up as soon as the bus came to a complete stop, waiting for her turn to file out into the aisle.

The resort was exactly what I'd expected—a sprawling timber and stone structure nestled at the base of the mountain, surrounded by pristine snow and towering pine trees. It looked like something out of a winter postcard, complete with icicles hanging from the eaves and smoke curling from the chimney. Not as luxurious as the private chalets my family usually stayed in, but decent enough, I suppose.

As we trudged through the snow toward the entrance, luggage and equipment in tow, I could see Julian and Sam up ahead, already laughing about something, their breath forming small clouds in the cold air. Victoria was walking with Sophie and Audrey, all three huddled together for warmth—or more likely, to share some juicy gossip. I found myself at the back of the group, a few paces behind Brooke, who moved with surprising confidence for someone so small, her snowboard tucked under one arm.

The lobby was warm and inviting, with a massive stone fireplace dominating one wall and comfortable leather couches scattered throughout. The ceilings were high, supported by exposed wooden beams, and antler chandeliers hung at intervals, casting a golden glow over everything. It smelled like pine and cinnamon and something else I couldn't quite identify, something distinctly "mountain."

Mr. Sinclair and the other chaperones gathered us all in the center of the lobby, standing on an ornate rug that depicted various wildlife scenes. We formed a loose circle around them, dropping our bags at our feet, everyone eager to get settled in and hit the slopes.

"Alright, everyone," Mr. Sinclair announced, his voice echoing slightly in the large space. "We've got twenty-four students and twelve rooms. You'll be sharing, two to a room."

A chorus of groans erupted from various corners of the group. Typical. Some people just can't handle not having their own space for a few days.

"I know, I know," Mr. Sinclair continued, holding up his hands to silence the complaints. "But that's how it is. Now, before we hand out keys, I need you all to pair up. Choose your roommate, and then come up to get your key."

Julian immediately threw his arm around Sam's shoulders. "Dibs on this guy," he said with a grin, and Sam laughed, giving him a playful shove.

I felt a tiny pang in my chest, watching them. I'd automatically assumed Sam would room with me, even though I knew that wasn't realistic. Boys and girls couldn't share rooms on school trips—that was rule number one. Still, seeing him so easily pair off with my brother made me feel... what? Jealous? Left out? It was stupid.

Victoria appeared at my side in an instant, looping her arm through mine. "We're rooming together, right?" she asked, her voice pitched high with fake sweetness. Before I could even respond, she had already started pulling me toward the front desk where the teachers were distributing keys.

I glanced around the lobby, taking stock of who was pairing with whom. Sophie and Audrey had already linked arms, whispering excitedly about something. Most of the other students had quickly formed their pairs, leaving just a few stragglers—including Brooke.

She stood a bit apart from everyone else, her gaze fixed on something outside the large picture windows. Her expression was difficult to read, but there was a tension in her shoulders that hadn't been there before. As the lobby cleared out, with pairs of students heading toward their rooms, she remained rooted to the spot, fidgeting with the straps of her backpack.

No one wants to room with her, I realized with a sudden clarity that made my stomach twist uncomfortably. It wasn't surprised exactly—Brooke wasn't exactly Miss Popularity—but seeing her standing there alone while everyone else had paired off hit me in a way I wasn't expecting.

Victoria tugged on my arm, pulling me forward. "Come on, Mads. Let's get our key before we end up with a room facing the parking lot."

But I couldn't look away from Brooke. Something about the set of her jaw, the forced casualness in her posture as she pretended not to care that she was the odd one out, struck a chord with me. A strange feeling washed over me, something I couldn't quite identify. Was it guilt? Pity? I didn't think I was capable of feeling sorry for anyone, especially not someone like Brooke Winters. I didn't care about people outside my circle. I didn't care about anyone except Sam, really.

So why did I suddenly feel so... responsible?

"Actually," I said, pulling my arm free from Victoria's grip, "I think I'm going to room with Brooke."

Victoria stared at me like I'd just announced I was dropping out of school to join the circus.

"What?" she hissed, her eyes narrowing to slits. "You're joking, right? Her?"

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, though my heart was racing for some reason.

"Yeah, why not? It could be... interesting."

"*Interesting?*" Victoria repeated, her voice rising an octave. "Have you lost your mind, Madeline? She's a total nobody. She doesn't even talk to anyone."

I felt a flash of irritation at Victoria's words. Yes, Brooke was quiet and kept to herself, but "nobody" seemed harsh, even by my standards. "Well, maybe that's the point," I said coolly. "At least she won't talk my ear off all night."

Victoria's face flushed an angry red. "Wow, okay. I see how it is." She crossed her arms over her chest, her acrylic nails tapping against her forearm in rapid succession.

"Fine. Room with the freak. See if I care."

"Don't be so dramatic, Vic," I said, rolling my eyes. "It's just for a few nights."

Without waiting for her response, I walked away, heading toward Brooke, who was now pretending to be deeply interested in a brochure about the resort's amenities. As I approached, she looked up, her brown eyes widening slightly in surprise.

"Looks like we're roommates," I announced, without preamble. I tried to sound casual, like this was the most normal thing in the world, me choosing to room with her instead of my actual friends.

Her eyebrows shot up, nearly disappearing beneath her bangs. "What? Why?" The confusion in her voice was almost comical.

"Because Victoria snores like a chainsaw," I lied, shrugging like it was no big deal. "And I need my beauty sleep."

Brooke stared at me for a long moment, like she was trying to solve a complex math problem. I could practically see the wheels turning in her head, trying to figure out my angle. Finally, a flicker of understanding

crossed her face, followed quickly by something that looked almost like gratitude—though she tried to hide it beneath a layer of suspicion.

She knew I'd seen her standing alone. She knew I'd stepped in to save her from the embarrassment of being the only person without a roommate. The realization that I'd done something kind for her seemed to both relieve and confuse her.

"Uh, thanks, I guess," she mumbled, adjusting her beanie nervously. "But you really don't have to—"

"It's done," I cut her off, not wanting to make a big deal out of it. The last thing I needed was for her to think I actually cared about her feelings or something.

"Let's just get our key and find our room. I'm dying to change out of these travel clothes."

I turned and headed toward Mr. Sinclair, who was still at the desk with the room assignments. I could feel Brooke following a few steps behind me, her presence like a shadow I couldn't quite shake. I could also feel Victoria's glare burning into my back from across the lobby. She was furious, that much was clear, but I'd deal with her later. For now, I just wanted to settle in and prepare for the afternoon on the slopes.

The clerk handed us a key—an actual metal key, not one of those electronic card things—with a wooden tag attached to it that had our room number carved into it: 217. Very rustic. Very quaint. Very... not what I was used to.

Our room was on the second floor, down a long hallway with thick carpet that muffled our footsteps. The wooden doors were spaced evenly on either side, each with a hand-painted number. When we finally reached 217, I fumbled with the key for a moment before the lock clicked and the door swung open.

The room was... cozy. That's the polite way of saying small. Two full-sized beds with navy blue quilts, a wooden dresser between them, a desk by the window, and a bathroom that I could already tell wasn't going to have enough counter space for all my skincare products. But it was clean, and the view from the window showed the mountain looming large and majestic against the clear blue sky.

"Well," I said, dropping my bag onto the bed closest to the window, "at least we won't have to fight over who gets the better view."

Brooke stood in the doorway for a moment longer, still looking like she couldn't quite believe the turn of events. Then, with a small sigh, she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"Why did you really do that?" she asked, her voice quiet but direct.

I kept my back to her, unzipping my bag and pretending to search for something. "Do what?" I asked, playing dumb even though I knew exactly what she meant.

"Room with me," she clarified, though her tone suggested she thought I was being deliberately obtuse. "You could have roomed with any of your friends. Why choose me?"

I turned around, composing my face into what I hoped was an expression of casual indifference. "I told you, Victoria snores."

Brooke's eyes narrowed, skepticism written all over her face. "No, she doesn't. I've heard her falling asleep in history class plenty of times. She breathes like a normal person."

I had to bite back a smile at that. *Of course Brooke would notice something like that.* She was observant, I'd give her that.

"Fine," I said with an exaggerated sigh. "Maybe I just needed a break from my friends. They can be a bit... much sometimes."

It wasn't a complete lie. Victoria's constant need for drama, Audrey's obsession with her appearance, Sophie's eagerness to please—it did get exhausting. But that still wasn't the real reason I'd chosen to room with Brooke.

She seemed to consider this for a moment, her head tilted slightly to one side. Then, apparently deciding it was the best answer she was going to get, she nodded once and moved to the other bed, setting her backpack down carefully.

"Well, thanks, I guess," she said, still sounding slightly confused but perhaps a bit relieved too. "For saving me from the humiliation of being the odd one out."

I felt a strange warmth in my chest at her words, an unfamiliar feeling that I quickly tried to smother. "Don't get used to it," I replied, my tone sharper than I'd intended. "This doesn't make us friends or anything."

She laughed then, a short, genuine sound that seemed to surprise both of us. "Trust me, Madeline, that's the last thing I'm worried about."

Something about the way she said it—not unkindly, but matter-of-factly—made me pause. I was used to people either fawning over me or outright

disliking me. Brooke's neutral acceptance, her lack of either adoration or animosity, was unexpected.

Before I could dwell on it too much, there was a sharp knock at the door. I opened it to find Victoria standing there, her arms crossed, her expression stormy.

"We're all heading down to grab lunch before hitting the slopes," she announced, her eyes flicking past me to where Brooke was unpacking her clothes.

"Are you coming, or are you too busy with your new BFF?"

I rolled my eyes at her dramatics. "Give me five minutes to change," I said, already turning back to my suitcase. "I'll meet you downstairs."

Victoria hovered in the doorway for a moment longer, clearly hoping for an invitation to come in and chat, maybe even an explanation for my strange behavior. When none came, she huffed and walked away, her boots thudding heavily on the carpet.

As I pulled out my snow pants and thermal layers, I glanced over at Brooke, who was studiously ignoring the entire exchange, focused on organizing her own gear. She moved with a quiet efficiency, everything neat and purposeful.

"You know," I said, breaking the silence, "for someone who doesn't have friends, you seem perfectly content with your own company."

Her hands stilled momentarily, and I wondered if I'd gone too far, bringing up that old wound. But then she resumed her task, her voice steady when she replied.

"Maybe that's because I know the difference between being alone and being lonely," she said, not looking at me. "Do you?"

The question caught me off guard, hitting closer to home than I wanted to admit. I thought of all the parties I'd attended, surrounded by people who claimed to be my friends but didn't really know me. I thought of the way Julian sometimes looked through me rather than at me, as if I wasn't worth his attention. I thought of how, even with Sam—sweet, solid Sam—I sometimes felt like I was playing a role rather than being myself.

Was I lonely? The thought had never occurred to me before, but now, standing in this small room with someone who seemed to understand solitude better than I understood my own popularity, I wasn't so sure.

"I'm heading down to lunch," I said, ignoring her question entirely. "I'll see you on the slopes later."

As I headed into the bathroom to change, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. I looked the same as always—hair perfectly in place, features arranged in their usual confident expression. But something felt different, off-kilter, like I was seeing myself through a slightly warped lens.

I shook my head, dismissing the feeling. It was just the altitude, messing with my head. Nothing more. This was going to be a perfect trip, filled with fun and freedom and everything I loved about skiing. Brooke Winters and her probing questions weren't going to change that.

But as I zipped up my ski jacket and prepared to join my friends, I couldn't help wondering if maybe, just maybe, rooming with Brooke was going to turn out to be more interesting than I'd anticipated.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

BROOKE

The door clicked shut behind Madeline, and I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. The sudden silence in the room felt heavy, almost tangible. I sat on the edge of my bed, fingers absently tracing the pattern on the navy blue quilt, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

She actually showed me kindness. It was such a strange thought that my brain kept circling back to it, examining it from different angles like some rare specimen. Madeline Hayes—queen of the social hierarchy, professional mean girl, my reluctant chemistry student—had voluntarily chosen to room with me. She'd saved me from that fatally awkward situation of being the odd one out, the girl no one wanted to pair with.

I was grateful, there was no denying that. The thought of standing alone in that lobby while everyone else paired off made my stomach clench with remembered humiliation. But gratitude wasn't the only emotion swirling inside me. There was suspicion too, a nagging sense that there was something Madeline wasn't telling me.

She has to get something out of this, right?

People like Madeline Hayes don't just do nice things without expecting something in return. That's not how their world works. Maybe she wanted me to do her homework, or maybe she was planning some elaborate prank. Or maybe—and this thought felt the most unsettling—she actually felt sorry for me.

I glanced at my already unpacked clothes in the small dresser beside my bed. I'd arranged everything neatly while Madeline was getting ready for lunch—the methodical process of folding and sorting had helped calm my racing thoughts then. I reached for the dog-eared paperback I'd placed on the nightstand. It was one of those epic fantasy novels my mom used to love, the kind with maps at the beginning and a glossary at the end. Reading it made me feel closer to her somehow.

"*See you on the slopes.*" Madeline's parting words echoed in my mind as I stretched out on the bed, book in hand. Who said I was already going to the slopes today? My plan was to just unpack and get all my stuff in place and just relax a bit, since I was tired from the bus ride, and just go hit the slopes first thing tomorrow morning. But now that idea felt... inadequate somehow. Like I was missing out.

I tried to focus on the book, but found myself reading the same paragraph three times without absorbing a single word. The text blurred before my eyes as my mind kept drifting back to Madeline's casual assumption.

See you on the slopes.

Did she just assume I would go? Or did she say it because she actually wanted to see me there?

Who am I kidding?

Madeline could not care less about that, right? She was probably out there with Sam and her other friends, completely forgetting I existed. But then again, she did save me from being left out, so she did feel something... right?

I closed the book with a frustrated sigh and stared up at the wooden beams crossing the ceiling. This was ridiculous. I was overthinking things, as usual. Madeline Hayes was not worth this much mental energy. She had done one marginally decent thing, and here I was analyzing it like it was some complex mathematical equation.

But as much as I tried to dismiss the thought, I couldn't shake the memory of her face when she'd noticed me standing alone in that lobby. There had been something there, a flicker of what looked almost like genuine concern. It didn't fit with everything I thought I knew about her, and that discrepancy gnawed at me.

Before I fully realized what I was doing, I had put down my book and was reaching for my snowboard gear. *Fine*, I thought, I'll go to the slopes. *Not because Madeline suggested it*, but because I love snowboarding and the mountain is right there, practically begging to be conquered.

As I zipped up my jacket and grabbed my board, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror hanging on the closet door. My cheeks were flushed with a mix of excitement and something else I couldn't quite name. It's just the cold, I told myself, adjusting my beanie over my ears. *Or maybe it's the altitude.*

The resort was relatively quiet as I made my way through the lobby and out to the lifts. Most people were probably having lunch, either at the resort restaurant or at one of the smaller cafes dotted around the base of the mountain. The lift line was practically nonexistent, and within minutes I was seated, gliding upward through crisp, clean air.

As the chair lift carried me higher and higher, the ground falling away beneath my feet, a familiar sense of peace washed over me. Up here, suspended between earth and sky, it was easier to think clearly. The mountain stretched out before me, its pristine white slopes glittering in the sunlight. This was what I had been looking forward to—this moment of perfect anticipation, the world spread out below me like a promise.

I wish Mom could see this view. The thought came unbidden, a bittersweet ache in my chest. She would have loved it here, would have been the first one on the lifts in the morning and the last one down at night. I could almost hear her laugh, see her eyes light up with the pure joy of the mountain.

I miss her so much.

Sometimes the absence felt like a physical thing, a hollow space inside me that nothing else could fill. But up here, with the wind in my face and the endless horizon before me, I felt closer to her somehow. Like maybe a part of her was still with me, riding these slopes, feeling this same wild freedom.

When I reached the top, I strapped on my board and took a moment to survey the runs spreading out below. From this vantage point, the entire mountain was my playground. I chose a blue run to start, wanting to warm up before tackling anything more challenging. The snow was perfect—not too icy, not too soft, just the right consistency for carving smooth, clean turns.

As I pushed off, all my confused thoughts about Madeline and roommates and social hierarchies melted away. There was only this: the rush of cold air against my face, the rhythmic sound of my board cutting through snow, the complete and total control over my own movement. I leaned into turns, shifted my weight from heel to toe edge, found that perfect balance point where speed and control merge into something like flying.

I did a few runs, each time scanning the slopes and the lift lines for a glimpse of blonde hair or that expensive designer ski jacket. I kept telling

myself I was just curious, that it didn't matter if I saw her or not, but each time my eyes searched the crowd, I felt a twinge of... something. Disappointment? Relief? I wasn't sure.

Why am I even looking for her? It was a question I didn't have a good answer for. Maybe I wanted to show off a little, prove that I wasn't just some boring bookworm. Maybe I wanted to see if she'd acknowledge me outside our room, in front of her friends. Or maybe I was just curious about which version of Madeline I'd encounter on the slopes—the mean girl from school, or the slightly more complex person who'd chosen to save me from embarrassment.

But I never saw her. Maybe she was getting a drink somewhere, or maybe we just kept missing each other on different runs. Or maybe she'd never intended to ski at all, and "see you on the slopes" had just been a throw-away line, as meaningless as "see you later" often is.

I didn't mind being alone though. In fact, there was something wonderfully freeing about carving my own path down the mountain, answering to no one's schedule but my own.

I may be alone, but I'm not lonely. The words I'd said to Madeline earlier rang true up here, where solitude felt like a choice rather than a condition.

After a couple of hours, my legs began to burn with that pleasant fatigue that comes from good exercise. The sun was starting to dip toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the snow. I decided to call it a day and head back to the resort to clean up before dinner.

Back in our room, I peeled off my damp outer layers and hung them up to dry. My hair was a mess from the helmet, and I desperately needed a hot shower to warm up my chilled bones. I grabbed my toiletries and a change of clothes and headed for the bathroom, looking forward to the sting of hot water on my cold skin.

I was midway through my shower, hair full of shampoo, when I heard the door to our room open and close. Madeline was back. Through the sound of the water, I could hear her moving around, the thump of something heavy—probably her ski boots—being dropped on the floor.

"I'm in the shower!" I called out, though I wasn't sure why I felt the need to announce it. The running water and closed bathroom door probably made that obvious.

A muffled response came from the other side of the door. It sounded like "Take your time," but I couldn't be sure over the rush of the shower. I rinsed

my hair and finished up quickly, not wanting to hog the bathroom in case she needed it too.

When I emerged, wrapped in a cloud of steam and wearing clean jeans and a sweater, I found Madeline sprawled across her bed, still in her ski clothes minus the jacket and helmet. Her blonde hair was tangled and slightly damp, probably from snow, and her face was flushed from the cold. Her eyes were closed, her breathing deep and even.

She's asleep. The realization struck me as oddly endearing. Madeline Hayes, always so perfectly put together, was passed out fully clothed on her bed, looking utterly exhausted. There was something vulnerable about her in that moment, something that made her seem more human and less like the untouchable queen bee I was used to seeing at school.

I moved quietly around the room, not wanting to wake her. I dried my hair with a towel, trying to tame the waves into something presentable, then settled back on my bed with my book. This time, I managed to actually read, losing myself in the story as the afternoon light gradually faded outside our window.

I was so absorbed in my book that I almost lost track of time. A glance at my phone showed it was nearly six—dinner time. The teachers had been very clear that attendance at group meals was mandatory, a way of checking in on everyone and making sure no one had fallen off the mountain or gotten into trouble.

Madeline was still sound asleep, her face pressed into the pillow in a way that would probably leave creases on her cheek. For a moment, I debated letting her sleep, but the thought of Mr. Sinclair marking her absent and coming to check on her—and by extension, me—was enough to make me decide waking her was the lesser evil.

"Madeline," I said softly, then a bit louder when she didn't stir.
"Madeline, wake up."

She groaned and buried her face deeper into the pillow.

"Madeline," I tried again, this time gently touching her shoulder. "It's dinner time. We have to go downstairs."

Her eyes flew open, disoriented and slightly panicked. She sat up quickly, wincing as she did so. "What time is it?" she demanded, her voice rough with sleep.

"Almost six," I replied, stepping back to give her space. "Dinner starts in five minutes."

"And you're just waking me up now?" she snapped, suddenly fully alert.

"I've been asleep for hours! Why didn't you wake me sooner?"

I blinked, taken aback by her hostility. "I didn't realize I was supposed to be your personal alarm clock."

She was already on her feet, frantically running her fingers through her tangled hair, her expression growing more horrified as she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

"Look at me! I can't go down like this. My hair is a disaster, and I'm still in my ski clothes!"

"You look fine, Madeline," I said, my patience wearing thin. "Everyone's going to be in casual clothes anyway."

"*Fine?*" she repeated, as if I'd just suggested she had three heads. "I look like I've been dragged through a hedge backward. And my makeup—" She caught sight of her face in the mirror and actually gasped. "I can't be seen like this!"

Something inside me snapped. All the goodwill I'd been feeling toward her, all the benefit of the doubt I'd been extending, evaporated in an instant. "You look fine, Madeline, so stop being so goddamn insufferable for just one minute and appreciate the fact that I woke you up at all!"

She spun around, her blue eyes flashing with anger. "I didn't ask to be woken up at the last possible second! And excuse me for caring how I look in public. Some of us have reputations to maintain."

"Oh yes, your precious reputation," I shot back, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Heaven forbid anyone sees the real Madeline Hayes without her perfect hair and makeup. They might actually realize you're a human being instead of some plastic doll."

Her mouth fell open, a mixture of shock and rage crossing her features. "You don't know the first thing about me or my life, so don't pretend you do. It's easy for you to judge when you don't care what anyone thinks of you."

"You think it's easy?" I asked, my voice rising. "You think it's easy being invisible, being the girl no one wants to room with? At least people look at you, even if it's only because of your designer clothes and your rich parents."

We stood there, glaring at each other, the air between us crackling with tension. In that moment, I remembered exactly why I'd disliked her from

the beginning. She was shallow, self-absorbed, obsessed with appearances. And she reminded me of everything I wasn't, everything I'd never be.

"This," she said finally, gesturing between us, "is why this roommate situation is going to be a disaster. We can't even get through one conversation without fighting."

And though I hated to admit it, she was right. Whatever brief connection we might have shared earlier—that moment of gratitude, that flicker of something like understanding—was gone. We were back to being who we'd always been: the popular girl and the outsider, oil and water, fundamentally incompatible.

"Let's just go to dinner," I said, the fight suddenly draining out of me.

"You can blame your appearance on me if anyone asks. Tell them I hogged the bathroom or something."

A look of surprise crossed her face, quickly replaced by a guarded expression.

"Fine," she said, grabbing a hairbrush from her bag and quickly running it through her hair.

"But just so we're clear, this doesn't change anything. We're still not friends."

"Trust me," I said, the words coming out more bitter than I'd intended, "that's the one thing we agree on."

As we headed down to dinner, not speaking, not even looking at each other, I couldn't help feeling a strange sense of loss. For a brief moment, I'd glimpsed something different in Madeline, something that had made me curious, even hopeful. But now that glimpse was gone, and I was left with the same old realization: people like Madeline Hayes and people like me don't mix. We never have, and we never will.

And yet, as we entered the dining hall and I watched her plaster on a smile and glide over to her waiting friends, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd seen something real beneath that perfect facade. Something that made me wonder if maybe, just maybe, there was more to Madeline Hayes than met the eye.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MADELINE

I still couldn't believe that Brooke hadn't woken me up until the last possible minute. I mean, who does that? I probably looked like I'd been dragged through a hedge backward—my hair tangled from sleep, my face bare of makeup, still wearing my ski clothes from earlier. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed my fears: my carefully cultivated image was completely ruined.

We walked to dinner in silence, the tension between us almost tangible. I kept a few steps ahead of her, trying to minimize the chance of anyone seeing us together. It wasn't that I was embarrassed to be seen with her—or at least, that's what I told myself. It was more that I didn't want to deal with Victoria's pointed stares or Julian's insufferable commentary.

The dining hall was already crowded when we arrived, the noise level rising with each group that filed in. Long wooden tables stretched across the room, covered with checkered tablecloths that gave the place a rustic, homey feel. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting a warm glow over everything. The smell of hearty mountain food filled the air—something rich and savory that I couldn't quite identify.

Mr. Sinclair stood at the front, checking names off his list as students entered. He gave me a nod as I walked past, his expression suggesting mild surprise that I'd actually made it on time. I pretended not to notice.

Victoria waved me over to a table where she sat with Audrey, Sophie, Julian, and Sam. I slid into the empty seat beside Sam, grateful for his steady, comforting presence. He leaned over, giving my shoulder a light squeeze.

"Nice of you to join us looking like that," Julian teased, gesturing to my disheveled appearance.

I shot him a glare. "Shut up, Julian."

Victoria examined me with critical eyes. "You could have at least brushed your hair, Mads. What happened to you?"

"I fell asleep after we got back," I said with a shrug, trying to sound casual. "Lost track of time."

Sam grinned. "Did you have a good nap at least? You were pretty worn out after those last runs."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Brooke make her way to an empty table in the far corner of the room. She sat down alone, pulling out her phone as if to shield herself from the reality of her solitude.

Something twisted in my chest, an uncomfortable feeling I didn't want to examine too closely. I turned back to Sam, forcing a smile. "Something like that."

The conversation flowed around me—Julian and Sam discussing which runs they wanted to try tomorrow, Victoria complaining about the cold, Audrey and Sophie debating which ski instructor was cuter. I nodded at all the right moments, made noncommittal sounds when questions were directed my way, but found my thoughts continuously drifting.

Brooke was eating quickly, methodically, her eyes fixed on her plate or her phone. Every so often, she'd tuck a strand of hair behind her ear in that unconscious gesture I'd noticed before. She looked so completely alone, yet somehow at peace with it, as if the noise and chaos of the dining hall couldn't touch her.

"Earth to Madeline," Sam said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You with us?"

I blinked, pulling my attention back to the table. "Sorry, what?"

Julian snickered. "Someone's a million miles away tonight. What's got you so distracted, sis? Plotting revenge on your roommate for making you look like a mess at dinner?"

My cheeks warmed. "No, I'm just tired. What were you saying?"

Sam repeated whatever it was he'd been telling me about tomorrow's plans, and I tried to focus, I really did. But my gaze kept wandering back to Brooke's corner. Except this time, when I looked, her table was empty. Her tray was gone, her presence vanished from the dining hall. When had she left? I hadn't noticed her get up, hadn't seen her walk out. For some reason, this bothered me. Where had she gone? Back to our room? Out exploring on her own?

"Madeline, hello? Earth to Madeline!" Victoria's sharp voice cut through my thoughts.

I looked up to find everyone at the table staring at me. "Sorry, what?"

Victoria rolled her eyes dramatically. "I said, we're going out to explore town a bit and maybe hit up a bar. So let's go."

The others were already standing, collecting their things, excitement buzzing between them at the prospect of sneaking into one of the local bars with their fake IDs. On any other night, I would have been the first one ready to go, eager for the adventure, the change of scenery, the chance to do something a little rebellious and completely fun.

But tonight, for reasons I couldn't quite articulate even to myself, I hesitated.

"Actually, I think I'm going to pass," I heard myself saying, ignoring the chorus of surprised protests that immediately followed. "I'm pretty tired from today. I think I need an early night."

"Seriously?" Julian looked at me like I'd grown a second head. "Since when do you, of all people, need an 'early night'?"

"Since today," I shot back, not wanting to explain the strange restlessness I couldn't shake. "Besides, I need to be rested for tomorrow."

Sam looked concerned. "Do you want me to stay back with you? We could watch a movie in the lounge or something."

The offer was tempting, but I shook my head. "No, you go have fun. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" His green eyes searched mine, and for a moment I felt a pang of guilt, like I was somehow betraying him by wanting to be alone.

"I'm sure," I said, stretching up to press a quick kiss to his cheek. "Go. Have fun. Tell me all about it tomorrow."

After a few more protests and promises to text, they finally left, their voices echoing in the hallway as they headed for the exit. I sat for a moment longer at the empty table, surrounded by dirty dishes and half-empty glasses, feeling strangely hollow.

The walk back to my room felt longer than it had earlier, the corridors emptier, the silence more profound. I kept my pace measured, not rushing but not dawdling either, my mind spinning with thoughts I couldn't quite wrangle into coherence.

When I reached room 217, I hesitated outside the door, my hand hovering over the knob. What was I expecting to find inside? Why did the prospect of entering fill me with such an odd mixture of anticipation and dread?

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the door open.

The room was dimly lit, with just the small bedside lamp casting a soft golden glow over Brooke's side. She was propped up against her pillows, a book open in her hands. It was old and worn-looking, the spine cracked from repeated reading, the pages yellowed with age. She glanced up when I entered, her expression guarded.

"You're back early," she said, her tone carefully neutral.

I shrugged, dropping my key on the dresser and kicking off my shoes. "Yeah, well, I wasn't really in the mood for whatever bar-hopping adventure the others had planned."

She raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical, but said nothing, returning her attention to her book. The silence stretched between us, not quite uncomfortable but not entirely easy either. I grabbed my pajamas and headed to the bathroom, changing quickly and then busying myself with my nighttime routine, washing my face, applying my various serums and creams, brushing my teeth until they gleamed. All the while, I was acutely aware of Brooke's presence just a few feet away, quietly turning pages, existing in her own little world.

When I emerged from the bathroom, she was still reading, completely absorbed. I studied her for a moment, taking in the slight furrow of concentration between her brows, the way her fingers delicately turned each page, the small, almost imperceptible smile that sometimes flitted across her lips in response to something she'd read.

"What are you reading that's so fascinating?" I asked finally, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

She looked up, seeming almost surprised that I was still there. "Oh, it's just... a fantasy novel. Nothing you'd be interested in."

There was something in her tone, a defensiveness that piqued my interest even further. "Try me," I challenged, sitting on the edge of my bed facing her.

She hesitated, her grip on the book tightening slightly. "It's called 'The Shadow Realms.' It's about a girl who discovers she can travel between parallel worlds. Each world is like a different version of our own, with its own rules and dangers. She has to learn to navigate them all while trying to find her way back home."

"God, that sounds boring," I said, the words coming out before I could stop them. "Is that really what you'd rather be doing than going out and

having actual fun? Reading about some fake girl's adventures instead of having your own?"

I regretted the words immediately, watching as her face fell, something flickering in her eyes that looked almost like pain before hardening into anger.

"Not everyone thinks getting drunk with a bunch of shallow idiots is the definition of fun," she snapped, closing her book with more force than necessary.

"At least I'm not so boring that I sit alone in a hotel room reading on a ski trip," I shot back, stung by her dismissal of my friends. "Do you even know how to have a good time, or is your idea of excitement getting to the end of a chapter?"

She laughed, a short, bitter sound that held no humor. "You don't know the first thing about me or what I find exciting. But sure, go ahead and judge me based on your narrow definition of what's cool or fun. That's what people like you do best, isn't it?"

"People like me?" I repeated, my voice rising slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"People who think their way is the only way," she said, her voice tight with restrained emotion. "People who judge others for being different, for finding joy in things they don't understand. For having the audacity to exist outside their little bubble of acceptability."

Her words hit harder than they should have, striking some chord deep inside me that I didn't want to examine too closely. "You think you're so superior, don't you? With your books and your perfect grades and your little judgments about everyone else. At least I know how to connect with actual people instead of fictional characters."

Something flashed in her eyes then, a raw vulnerability that made me falter for just a moment. She clutched the book tighter, like it was something precious, something more than just paper and ink.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," she said, her voice tight with emotion. "Not everything has to be loud and public to be meaningful."

The implication hung in the air between us—that I was too shallow, too self-absorbed to understand deeper connections. It stung, partly because it wasn't entirely untrue.

"Whatever," I said finally, unable to think of a better response. "At least I'm not using a book to hide from real life."

She looked at me for a long moment, something unreadable in her expression. Then, without another word, she placed the book carefully on her nightstand, turned off her lamp, and rolled over, her back to me in a clear dismissal.

The room plunged into darkness, save for the faint moonlight filtering through the blinds. I stood frozen, a strange heaviness settling in my chest. I'd won the argument, technically—she'd been the one to retreat, to turn away first. So why did it feel like I was the one who had lost something?

I slipped under my covers and stared at the ceiling, listening to the sound of Brooke's breathing across the room. It wasn't the even rhythm of sleep, but rather the carefully controlled pattern of someone trying very hard to appear calm when they weren't.

Something nagged at me, something about the way she'd reacted, the hurt that had flashed across her face before anger replaced it. A memory stirred—something Julian had mentioned once about the weird quiet girl whose mom had died a few years back. Was that Brooke? Was I missing something important here?

The thought made me uneasy, like I'd stepped into deeper water than I realized.

"Brooke?" I ventured quietly into the darkness. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to—"

"I'm fine," came the flat response, no emotion coloring the words. "Just drop it."

I swallowed hard, an unfamiliar feeling of discomfort washing over me. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said. About the book. I didn't realize it was important to you."

The silence stretched so long I thought she might not respond at all. Finally, she sighed, the sound barely audible in the quiet room.

"Whatever. Just go to sleep, Madeline."

I lay there in the darkness, wondering how I always seemed to say the exact wrong thing to her, how every interaction ended with one of us hurt or angry or both. It was exhausting, this constant back and forth, this endless dance of advance and retreat. And yet, I couldn't seem to stop myself from engaging with her, from pushing her buttons, from trying to get past that careful wall of indifference she maintained.

As sleep finally began to claim me, one thought kept circling in my mind: why did I care so much about what Brooke Winters thought of me?

Why couldn't I just ignore her, like I did everyone else who didn't matter in my carefully constructed social hierarchy?

The question followed me into my dreams, unanswered and unsettling, like a shadow I couldn't quite shake.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BROOKE

I woke up at 5:30 AM. It wasn't hard for me to get up early—even through the thin resort curtains, the way moonlight reflected off the snow created this beautiful, ethereal glow that crept into our room. It was like a whispered invitation that only the truly dedicated could hear. Fresh powder. First tracks. Perfect conditions.

For a brief, sleep-disoriented moment, I forgot about the argument with Madeline the night before. Then it all rushed back—the way she'd dismissed my book, the hurt that had lanced through me when she called me boring, the way I'd instantly shut down rather than let her see how deeply her words had cut.

I glanced over at her sleeping form, bundled under the covers. Only the top of her blonde head was visible, her face buried in the pillow. She looked oddly vulnerable like this, stripped of all her usual confidence and cutting remarks. There was something almost innocent about her when she was asleep.

I shook the thought away. I wasn't going to waste another precious minute thinking about Madeline Hayes.

I slipped out of bed quietly, careful not to make any noise that might wake her—though I doubted anything short of a fire alarm could rouse her this early. I grabbed my clothes and headed for the bathroom, where I changed quickly into my thermal base layers, followed by my snowboarding pants and a comfortable hoodie. I pulled my hair up into a messy bun, not bothering with anything elaborate. It would all be hidden under a helmet anyway.

I didn't wake Madeline. Why would I? She'd made it abundantly clear that we weren't friends. Besides, she'd probably sleep until at least nine—that seemed more her style. And honestly, I preferred hitting the slopes alone. No waiting for other people, no compromising on which runs to take, just me and the mountain in perfect harmony.

The hallways were silent as I made my way down to the dining hall, my snowboard boots creating soft thuds against the carpet. Outside the large windows, the world was still bathed in pre-dawn darkness, but I could make out the faint silhouette of the mountain against the gradually lightening sky.

The dining hall was almost entirely empty when I arrived. A few staff members were setting up the breakfast buffet, and at a small table in the corner sat Mr. Sinclair, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and what looked like student papers in the other. Even on a ski trip, he couldn't escape grading.

He looked up as I entered, surprise registering on his face before morphing into an approving smile.

"Ms. Winters," he said, raising his coffee mug in greeting. "Early bird catches the worm, I see."

I returned his smile with a small one of my own. "Or the fresh powder, in this case."

"Indeed." He nodded toward the buffet. "You're the first student down. Better get some fuel before you head out."

I didn't need to be told twice. I loaded my plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, and a slice of toast—proper mountain fuel. As an afterthought, I grabbed an apple to stash in my pocket for later. Sitting at a table near the window, I ate quickly, watching as the sky gradually transitioned from deep blue to the paler hues of early morning.

My mind, frustratingly, kept drifting back to Madeline. I pictured her still asleep in our room, blissfully unaware that I was already up and heading for the slopes. Would she wonder where I was when she woke up? Would she care? Why did I even care if she cared?

I shook my head, annoyed with myself. This was ridiculous. I didn't need her approval, her friendship, or anything else from her. I had been perfectly fine on my own before Mr. Sinclair forced us together for tutoring, and I would be perfectly fine after this trip ended.

Some small voice in the back of my mind whispered that maybe things would be different if I had more friends, if I wasn't always the odd one out. Maybe I should try harder to connect with people, to let them see more than just the studious exterior I presented to the world.

But no. I was happy with my life. I had my books, my snowboard, and my own thoughts for company. I didn't need the drama that came with friendships—the petty fights, the gossip, the constant need to perform for an

audience. Look at Madeline, surrounded by people who probably didn't even know the real her. What was the point of that kind of shallow connection?

The only person who had ever truly understood me was my mom. She had never expected me to be anything other than who I was, had never made me feel like I needed to change to be worthy of love. I missed her with a physical ache that never really went away.

I finished breakfast quickly and headed out, my board tucked under my arm, my breath puffing out in small clouds in the crisp morning air. The lifts had just started running, the first operators giving me friendly nods as I approached.

"First one up," one of them commented, his weathered face creasing into a smile beneath his beard. "Going to lay down some fresh tracks, huh?"

"That's the plan," I replied, unable to keep the excitement from my voice.

The ride up was peaceful, almost meditative. The world below me transformed as I ascended, the resort growing smaller, the vista expanding. From here, everything looked different—cleaner, simpler, more beautiful. Free from the complications of human interaction, the mountain existed in its own perfect state of being.

At the top, I paused for a moment, taking in the view. The sun was just beginning to crest the eastern peaks, casting a golden glow across the untouched snow. Perfect corduroy lines stretched down the slope where the grooming machines had passed earlier, an invitation to carve my own path through them.

I strapped in, adjusted my goggles, and pushed off.

The sensation was immediate and exhilarating—the rush of cold air against my face, the feeling of floating as my board glided over the snow, the perfect balance of control and abandon. This was where I felt most alive, most myself. This was freedom.

I carved smooth, wide turns, my board leaving clean lines through the freshly groomed snow. With each turn, I built more speed, more confidence, until I was flying down the mountain, the world reduced to nothing but the slope ahead and the board beneath my feet.

I lost track of time, taking run after run, each one better than the last as I fine-tuned my movements, pushed myself faster, tried more challenging lines. The mountain was still largely empty, a playground all to myself.

By around 8:30, though, things started to change. More students appeared at the lifts, sleepy-eyed and bundled in their gear. I recognized faces from our school, mixed in with other guests at the resort. As I rode the lift up for what had to be my fourth or fifth run, I spotted a familiar group congregating at the base—Madeline and her usual entourage.

Julian was there, gesturing animatedly as he spoke, probably boasting about some run he'd barely survived. Victoria and Audrey flanked Madeline, their matching ski outfits looking more suited for a photoshoot than actual skiing. Sam stood close to Madeline, his arm around her shoulders as they surveyed the slopes.

From my vantage point on the lift, they looked like a scene from a movie about popular high school kids on a winter vacation. Perfect, polished, posed.

I was heading up for another run, and they were standing around chatting. I felt a small, petty sense of satisfaction at that. While they were just starting their day, I'd already been carving through fresh powder all morning.

Something strange happened during my next run. As I carved my way down the mountain, about halfway through the descent, I noticed that I had attracted an audience. A small cluster of people had gathered along the edge of the run, pointing and watching as I approached. I was the only one on this particular section of the slope at the moment, and for some reason, I had become a spectacle.

Under normal circumstances, this would have horrified me. I hated being the center of attention—it was why I preferred to blend into the background at school, to go unnoticed in the classroom except when I knew the answer to a particularly difficult question. Invisibility was my comfort zone.

But here, on the mountain? It felt... different.

This was my domain, my element. I wasn't just some quiet girl who sat alone at lunch or spent her weekends reading. I was a snowboarder, and a damn good one at that. For once, people were seeing a part of me I was actually proud to show.

So instead of shrinking under their gaze, I embraced it. I laid into my turns more dramatically, picked up more speed, added in a little flair here and there—nothing too showy, just enough to demonstrate that I knew what I was doing.

As I drew closer to the bottom, I could make out individual faces in the small crowd. There were some younger kids from our school looking impressed, a few adults nodding in appreciation of my technique, and right in the center, Madeline and her friends. Julian was saying something to Sam, who was watching me with raised eyebrows. Victoria and Audrey looked annoyed, probably because someone else was getting attention.

And Madeline? Her expression was harder to read. She seemed almost... conflicted? Maybe even a little impressed? The thought sent an unexpected thrill through me.

Why did I care what Madeline thought? I didn't—I told myself I didn't. And yet, as I approached the final stretch, I found myself pushing harder, carving deeper, putting on my best performance.

The moment passed quickly. I reached the bottom, slowed to a stop well away from the crowd, and unclipped one foot to skate toward the lift line. The small audience dispersed, returning to their own activities. I caught one last glimpse of Madeline, her blue eyes still following me, before she turned back to Sam and said something that made him laugh.

I felt a strange mixture of emotions as I headed back to the lift—pride in my abilities, satisfaction at having momentarily claimed the spotlight, and an annoying little twinge of something that felt dangerously close to caring what Madeline Hayes thought of me.

That last bit had to go. I refused to give her that kind of power. I was here for the mountain, for the snow, for the perfect solitude of carving my own path. Not for the approval of someone who thought reading books was boring and cared more about appearances than substance.

As I settled into the lift chair for another ascent, I made myself a promise: I wouldn't look for Madeline again. I wouldn't wonder what she thought. I would focus on the snow, the sky, the sensation of flying down the mountain—all the things that brought me joy long before Madeline Hayes entered my life, and all the things that would continue to bring me joy long after she inevitably exited it.

The lift carried me higher, and with each foot of elevation, I felt a little more like myself again—Brooke Winters, snowboarder, reader, daughter of a woman who taught me to love the mountains. Not Brooke Winters, chemistry tutor, roommate of Madeline Hayes, girl who sometimes cared too much about things she shouldn't.

As I reached the top and prepared for another run, I took a deep breath of the clear mountain air. This was my day, my mountain, my moment. And I wasn't going to let thoughts of Madeline Hayes steal even one more second of it from me.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MADELINE

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was the empty bed across from mine. Brooke was gone, her covers already neatly made, like she'd never been there at all. For a second, panic shot through me—had I overslept again? I fumbled for my phone on the nightstand, squinting at the screen. 7:15 AM. Not only had I not overslept, I'd actually woken up before my alarm.

Which meant Brooke had left even earlier. Who does that? Who voluntarily gets up at the crack of dawn on a ski trip?

I sat up, pushing my hair out of my face, an inexplicable annoyance settling over me. It felt rude somehow, her disappearing without a word. Though honestly, after our argument last night, I couldn't exactly blame her for not wanting to be around me.

Still, she could have at least let me know where she was going. Not that I cared, obviously. It was just weird to wake up to an empty room.

I took my time getting ready, enjoying the rare luxury of having the bathroom all to myself. I spent extra time on my makeup, carefully applying it to make it look effortless. Like I just naturally woke up with perfectly flushed cheeks and subtly defined eyes. I chose my ski outfit with similar precision—a pale blue jacket with white fur trim that made my eyes pop, matching pants that fit perfectly. If I was going to hit the slopes, I was going to look good doing it.

The dining hall was bustling when I arrived, filled with the eager chatter of students excited for a day on the mountain. I scanned the room automatically, looking for Brooke, but she wasn't there either. Where had she disappeared to so early?

Victoria waved me over to the table where she sat with the usual crowd. She'd apparently forgiven me for the roommate betrayal, or at least decided to temporarily overlook it.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," Julian teased as I slid into the seat beside Sam. "Thought you might sleep through the entire trip."

"It's barely eight," I replied, rolling my eyes. "And I'm here before any of you hit the slopes, so I'd say I'm doing pretty well."

Sam leaned over, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek. "You look amazing," he murmured, his breath warm against my skin. "How'd you sleep?"

"Fine," I said automatically, though that wasn't entirely true. I'd lain awake for a while after our argument, replaying Brooke's words in my head, wondering if her mother really had died. I couldn't quite shake the feeling that I'd crossed a line, mocking something that was genuinely important to her. But that was too complicated to get into with Sam, especially with everyone else listening, so I just smiled and changed the subject. "What's our plan for today?"

"The usual runs first," Sam said, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "Then maybe try that double black Julian's been talking about."

Julian nodded enthusiastically. "It's supposed to be insane. Thirty-five-degree pitch, narrow as hell, trees everywhere."

"Sounds like a death wish," Victoria commented, picking at her fruit salad. "Count me out."

"Same," Audrey agreed. "I'm thinking we stick to the blues. I didn't bring these cute new ski pants just to wipe out and spend the day covered in snow."

The conversation devolved into a friendly argument about which runs to tackle first, with everyone talking over each other, gesturing with toast and coffee cups. I found myself only half listening, my thoughts drifting back to Brooke and her unexplained absence.

"How's the roommate situation?" Sam asked quietly, as if reading my mind. "You and Brooke getting along any better?"

I shrugged, trying to appear casual. "It's fine. We're basically ignoring each other, which works for me."

"Except she ditched you this morning," Julian cut in, clearly eavesdropping. "Rude much?"

"It's not like we coordinated schedules," I said, feeling an odd impulse to defend Brooke, which made absolutely no sense. "She can do whatever she wants."

Julian raised an eyebrow. "Since when are you so chill about people blowing you off?"

"She didn't blow me off, Julian. We're not friends. We're just sharing a room."

Sam placed his hand over mine on the table, a small gesture of support that would normally have made me feel better. Today, though, it just reminded me of the weird, unsettled feeling that had taken root in my chest since last night's argument with Brooke.

"Well, I think it's weird," Victoria declared, apparently having been listening in as well. "Who gets up before seven on a school trip? That girl is just strange."

I didn't respond, but I silently disagreed. There was something almost admirable about Brooke's dedication, her willingness to wake up early to get what she wanted. She didn't seem to care what anyone thought of her, didn't adjust her behavior to fit in or be liked. I'd never had that kind of freedom.

After breakfast, we all headed back to our rooms to grab our gear before meeting at the lifts. The resort was coming alive now, with more and more people heading out to enjoy the perfect conditions. The sky was a brilliant blue, the kind that seems to exist only in the mountains, and the air was crisp but not bitterly cold. A perfect day for skiing.

As we approached the lift area, I noticed a small crowd gathered at the edge of the main run, all looking up at the mountain. Curious, I followed their gaze.

A lone figure was carving down the slope, a snowboarder moving with such fluid grace that it almost looked like dancing. Even from this distance, I could tell they were good—really good. They navigated the terrain with a confidence that seemed to come from years of practice, each turn precise, each movement deliberate yet effortless.

"Who is that?" Sam asked, shielding his eyes from the sun to get a better look.

"No idea," Julian replied, sounding genuinely impressed. "But they're killing it."

The snowboarder was getting closer now, picking up speed as they approached the final stretch. There was something familiar about the way they moved, something that tugged at my memory. And then, as they neared the bottom of the run, I recognized her.

Brooke.

Of course it was Brooke. Little Miss Perfect, excelling at yet another thing I didn't know she could do. A strange mix of emotions washed over me—surprise, admiration, and something else, something sharper and less flattering. Was it jealousy? The idea was so absurd I almost laughed out loud. Me, jealous of Brooke Winters? Impossible.

And yet, watching her carve her way down that mountain, completely in her element, I couldn't deny the twinge of something unpleasant in my stomach. It wasn't that I wanted to be her—I would never want that. But there was something about the way everyone was watching her, admiring her, that made me feel... invisible. And I wasn't used to being invisible.

"Wait, is that your roommate?" Victoria asked, her voice pitching higher with surprise. "Since when is she a snowboarding prodigy?"

"I had no idea," I murmured, watching as Brooke came to a graceful stop near the lift line, unclipping one foot from her board with practiced ease. She didn't look in our direction, but somehow I got the feeling she knew we were watching.

"Well, damn," Julian said, letting out a low whistle. "Quiet girl's got skills. Who would've thought?"

"It's not that impressive," I heard myself saying, though even I didn't believe it. "Snowboarding's not that hard."

Sam glanced at me, a knowing smile playing at his lips. "Says the girl who's never set foot on a snowboard."

"How hard can it be?" I challenged, a plan already forming in my mind. "If she can do it, I definitely can."

The words were out before I'd fully thought them through, but once they were hanging in the air, I couldn't take them back. And I didn't want to. Suddenly, nothing seemed more important than proving I could do whatever Brooke could do—and do it better.

"Mads, I don't think that's a good idea," Sam said, his brow furrowing with concern. "Snowboarding has a pretty steep learning curve. It takes time to get the hang of it."

"I'm a quick learner," I insisted, already scanning the rental shop for where I could swap my skis for a snowboard. "Besides, don't you think it'll be fun to try something new?"

Sam looked skeptical but didn't argue further. That was one of the things I appreciated about him—he never tried to control me, even when he

thought I was making a mistake. Julian, on the other hand, had no such reservations.

"This is going to be hilarious," he said, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Ten bucks says you face-plant within the first five minutes."

"Twenty says I don't," I shot back, even as a tiny voice in the back of my mind whispered that he was probably right.

Thirty minutes later, we were on the lift heading up the mountain. I sat beside Sam, my newly rented snowboard dangling from one foot, feeling much heavier than I'd expected. The guy at the rental shop had given me a crash course in the basics—how to strap in, how to position my feet, how to shift my weight to turn. It had seemed simple enough in theory.

But as the lift carried us higher and higher, my confidence began to waver. The mountain looked bigger from this angle, steeper, more intimidating. What had seemed like a brilliant idea at the base now felt like a spectacular mistake in the making.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Sam said quietly, as if sensing my growing apprehension. "We could stick to skiing today, maybe try snowboarding another time when you've had a lesson."

His concern irritated me, though I knew it was rooted in care. "I want to try," I insisted, my voice sharper than intended. "Stop worrying so much."

He fell silent, and I immediately felt guilty for snapping at him. It wasn't his fault I'd gotten myself into this situation. But I couldn't back down now, not with Julian's smug face watching, not with the memory of Brooke's effortless skill still fresh in my mind.

When we reached the top, I felt a jolt of panic. The run looked even steeper from up here, a daunting expanse of white stretching out below us. Around me, everyone was unloading from the lift with practiced ease, skiers pushing off with their poles, snowboarders gliding away on one foot before stopping to strap in their second binding.

I managed to slide off the lift without falling, which felt like a small victory. Sam stayed close, waiting patiently as I awkwardly lowered myself to the snow to secure my other foot to the board. Victoria, Audrey, and Julian were already a few yards away, waiting with varying degrees of impatience.

"Ready?" Sam asked once I'd finished strapping in.

"As I'll ever be," I replied, trying to sound confident as I pushed myself up to standing.

The board felt unwieldy beneath me, a foreign object I couldn't quite control. I wobbled precariously, arms outstretched for balance, feeling ridiculous and exposed. A small child zoomed past on skis, making it look effortlessly easy, which only added to my frustration.

"Just take it slow," Sam advised, hovering nearby. "Remember what the guy said—weight on your front foot to go straight, shift to your heels to slow down."

I nodded, took a deep breath, and pushed off.

For about five seconds, it wasn't terrible. I was moving, staying upright, the board sliding across the snow in a more or less straight line. But then the slope steepened slightly, my speed increased, and panic set in. I tried to remember what I was supposed to do—shift my weight to my heels? Or was it my toes? My body seemed to freeze, unable to translate thought into action.

Before I knew what was happening, the front edge of my board caught in the snow, stopping abruptly while the rest of me kept going. I pitched forward, arms flailing uselessly, and slammed face-first into the snow with enough force to knock the wind out of me.

The fall was spectacular and humiliating. I slid a few feet on my chest, snow finding its way into my collar, my gloves, somehow even under my goggles. When I finally came to a stop, I was dangerously close to the edge of the run, where the groomed snow gave way to deeper powder dotted with trees.

"Madeline!" Sam's voice rang out, filled with concern. I heard the scrape of his skis as he quickly made his way to me.

But it was Julian's reaction that really stung—a loud, unmistakable burst of laughter that carried across the slope. "That didn't even take five minutes!" he called out, not bothering to hide his amusement. "I believe that's twenty bucks you owe me, sis!"

I pushed myself up slowly, brushing snow from my clothes, my cheeks burning with embarrassment beneath my cold-reddened skin. Sam reached me, his face a mask of worry.

"Are you okay? That was a hard fall."

"I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth, though my wrists ached from trying to break my fall and my pride was severely bruised. The fact that

other skiers were slowing down to check out the commotion only made it worse. I imagined them all laughing at me, the girl who thought she could just pick up a snowboard and master it immediately.

"Maybe we should stick to skiing today," Sam suggested gently, helping me brush snow from my back.

His kindness, normally so comforting, felt patronizing in that moment. I didn't want his pity or his help. I wanted to be left alone to deal with my humiliation in private.

"Just go on without me," I said, unable to keep the frustration from my voice. "I'll catch up later."

"I'm not leaving you here," he protested. "Not after that fall."

"Sam, I'm serious," I insisted, my tone hardening. "Just go. I need a minute, okay?"

He hesitated, clearly torn between respecting my wishes and his desire to help. Julian made the decision easier by sliding over, still smirking.

"Come on, man," he said to Sam. "She's fine, just her ego's bruised. Let's hit that double black before it gets too crowded."

Sam glanced between us, uncertainty written all over his face. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure," I replied firmly. "Go. Have fun."

After another moment's hesitation, he nodded, giving my arm a gentle squeeze before pushing off. Julian shot me one last amused look before following, already launching into some story about a worse wipeout he'd once seen. Victoria and Audrey skied past with sympathetic but slightly smug expressions, neither bothering to stop.

I watched them go, a mix of relief and abandonment washing over me. At least now I could figure out how to get down the mountain without an audience. I was considering just unstrapping my feet and walking down when I heard a voice behind me—a voice I recognized immediately.

"Are you okay?"

I turned slowly, already knowing who I'd see.

Great. Perfect. Of all the people to witness my humiliation, it had to be her.

Brooke stood a few feet away, her snowboard tucked under one arm, her expression a careful mixture of concern and wariness. It was clear she hadn't realized it was me at first—she'd just stopped to help what she

thought was a stranger who had taken a bad fall. The kind of decent thing a genuinely good person would do.

I watched as recognition dawned in her eyes, her expression shifting from general concern to something more complicated when she realized it was me sprawled in the snow. There was a flash of surprise, followed by what might have been amusement quickly masked by renewed concern. But there was no mockery in her gaze, no satisfied smirk at my failure. Just genuine concern, which somehow made it worse.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BROOKE

I'd been on the mountain for a few hours now, carving through the snow, enjoying the feeling of freedom that always came with snowboarding.

Each run felt better than the last, my body finding that perfect rhythm where everything just flows. After my fourth lap down the same stretch, I was ready for a bit of a break. My legs were starting to burn pleasantly, a reminder that I'd been pushing myself hard all morning.

At the top of the lift, I found a quiet spot off to the side, away from the flow of other skiers unloading. I sat down in the snow, taking a moment to readjust my bindings and catch my breath. The view was stunning from up here—endless white peaks stretching out against that perfect blue sky. It was the kind of beauty that could almost make you forget everything else.

As I tightened my bindings, I caught movement from the corner of my eye—a snowboarder who clearly had no idea what they were doing. I watched as they pushed off awkwardly, their arms flailing as they tried to find balance. It was the universal posture of a first-timer, that rigid, terrified stance that inevitably leads to a wipeout.

And sure enough, within seconds, they caught an edge and went down hard, face-planting spectacularly before sliding dangerously close to the edge of the run. I winced in sympathy. I'd been there before—everyone has when they're learning. That first day on a snowboard is always brutal.

A group of people quickly gathered around the fallen snowboarder—friends, I assumed. There seemed to be some kind of disagreement, with one guy looking particularly concerned while the others appeared eager to move on. After a brief conversation, they all left, leaving the fallen boarder alone on the slope.

I frowned. Who leaves someone who just took a nasty fall like that? Even if they claimed to be fine, that was just poor mountain etiquette. Without really thinking about it, I got to my feet, strapped my back foot into

my binding, and glided over to where the person was still sitting in the snow, looking dejected.

"Are you okay?" I asked, stopping a few feet away.

The snowboarder turned slowly, and with a jolt of surprise, I realized it was Madeline. At first, I hadn't recognized her—bundled up in her fancy ski gear, her face partially obscured by her goggles. But there was no mistaking those blue eyes, now wide with what looked like mortification as she recognized me.

"I'm fine," she said sharply, though the way she was gingerly moving her wrists suggested otherwise.

I bit back a smile. Of course she would say she was fine. Madeline Hayes would never admit to being anything less than perfect, even while sitting in a pile of snow after a spectacular wipeout.

"You know, usually people take a lesson before throwing themselves down a mountain," I said, unable to resist a touch of sarcasm. "But I guess you decided to go with the trial-by-fire approach?"

She glared at me, trying to push herself up but struggling with the unwieldy board still attached to her feet. "I don't need a lesson," she insisted, though her actions clearly contradicted her words. "I was doing fine until that... bump."

I snorted. "What bump? You caught an edge on a perfectly groomed run." Despite my amusement, I extended my hand to help her up. "Come on, let me help before you actually hurt yourself."

She hesitated, staring at my outstretched hand like it might bite her. For a moment, I thought her pride might win out and she'd refuse my help. But then, surprisingly, she reached up and took it, allowing me to pull her to her feet.

"This is harder than it looks," she admitted grudgingly, once she was upright again.

"Yeah, no kidding," I replied. "Most people don't just strap on a board and expect to master it immediately. It takes practice."

She brushed snow from her jacket, her expression a mixture of frustration and determination. "Well, I'm not giving up. I just need to figure it out."

I studied her for a moment, weighing my options. The smart thing would be to wish her luck and continue with my own day. But something about her

stubborn determination, combined with the fact that she was clearly going to hurt herself if left to her own devices, made me hesitate.

"I could show you," I heard myself offering, surprising even myself. "The basics, at least. So you don't, you know, kill yourself."

Her eyes widened slightly. "You'd do that? Why?"

It was a fair question. Why would I help Madeline Hayes, of all people? The girl who'd spent most of our time together either insulting me or dismissing me?

I shrugged, trying to appear casual. "Because contrary to what you might think, I'm not actually in the habit of leaving people to injure themselves on mountainsides. Even people I don't particularly like."

A flicker of something—hurt, maybe?—crossed her face before she masked it with her usual confidence. "Fine," she said, raising her chin slightly. "Show me."

And so I did. I started with the absolute basics—how to position her feet, how to distribute her weight, how to use her edges to control speed and direction. Madeline listened with surprising attentiveness, her usual haughty demeanor replaced by genuine concentration.

"The most common mistake beginners make is leaning back," I explained, demonstrating the proper stance. "It feels safer, but it actually gives you less control. You want your weight centered over the board, knees bent, shoulders aligned with your feet."

She nodded, mimicking my position. "Like this?"

"Close," I said, moving closer to adjust her stance slightly. "Bend your knees a bit more. Yeah, that's better."

We started on a gentle section of the slope, just practicing the feel of sliding on the board, getting comfortable with the balance. Madeline fell a few more times, but each time she got back up more quickly, her determination never wavering.

"Try turning now," I instructed after she'd managed to go straight for a decent stretch without falling. "Shift your weight to your toes to go to your right, to your heels to go left. Don't force it—let the board do the work."

She attempted it, wobbling precariously before overcorrecting and ending up on her butt again. But instead of the frustrated scowl I expected, she actually laughed.

"This is impossible," she said, but there was no real defeat in her voice, just the exhilaration that comes with learning something new.

"It's not impossible," I assured her, offering my hand again to help her up. "It just takes practice. Try again."

And she did, again and again, each attempt a little better than the last. About half an hour into our impromptu lesson, something clicked. She linked a series of turns, her movements becoming more fluid, more confident. The look of focused concentration on her face gave way to genuine delight.

"I'm doing it!" she exclaimed, her smile wider and more genuine than I'd ever seen it.

"Wow, looks like you're a natural," I called back, surprised at how pleased I felt at her progress. "Just don't get too cocky!"

But of course, she did. Feeling more confident, she picked up speed, carving wider turns and clearly enjoying the rush. I kept pace beside her, ready to step in if needed, but also surprisingly enjoying myself. There was something infectious about her enthusiasm, about seeing someone experience the joy of snowboarding for the first time.

For those moments, it was like all the tension between us had evaporated. We weren't Madeline Hayes and Brooke Winters, the popular girl and the loner, the bully and the bookworm. We were just two people enjoying the mountain, laughing when one of us took a spill, celebrating the small victories of linked turns and successful stops.

But then, predictably, Madeline's newfound confidence got the better of her. She attempted a sharper turn at a higher speed than she was ready for, caught her edge again, and went down in a flurry of snow and limbs.

"I told you so," I said, sliding to a stop beside her, unable to keep the amusement from my voice. "Didn't I warn you about getting cocky?"

She looked up at me from her position in the snow, and for a second I thought she might be actually angry. But then she pushed herself up and turned around. The next thing I knew, a handful of snow hit me square in the chest, exploding in a puff of powder. I stood there for a moment, stunned, as Madeline's laughter rang out, clear and genuine in the cold mountain air. When she looked at me, there was a mischievous glint in her eyes I'd never seen before.

"Oh, you're so asking for it," I said, already bending to gather my own ammunition.

What followed was possibly the most ridiculous and yet most fun snowball fight I'd ever participated in. We were both still attached to our boards, which made moving around challenging, but somehow that only added to the hilarity. We lobbed snowballs at each other, ducking and weaving as best we could, our laughter echoing across the slope.

Madeline's aim was surprisingly good, and she managed to nail me with several well-placed shots, including one that caught me right in the face, sending snow down the collar of my jacket. In retaliation, I maneuvered close enough to dump a handful of snow directly onto her head, causing her to shriek in mock outrage.

We were both breathless and laughing uncontrollably, feeling like little kids without a care in the world. It was strange how natural it felt, how easy it was to forget all the reasons we supposedly couldn't stand each other. In that moment, covered in snow and grinning like fools, we were just having fun.

Eventually, we called a truce, both of us winded and soaked from melting snow.

"Not bad for your first day on a board," I admitted, brushing snow from my jacket.

"Thanks to my excellent teacher," she replied, and though her tone was teasing, there seemed to be genuine gratitude behind it.

We decided to take one more run together before heading back up. This time, Madeline managed to make it all the way down without falling, her movements becoming more confident and fluid with each turn. It was impressive how quickly she'd picked it up, though I shouldn't have been surprised. For all her faults, Madeline wasn't one to back down from a challenge.

When we reached the bottom, we headed back to the lift for another run. As we waited in the short line, Madeline chatted animatedly about her progress, her eyes bright with excitement. It was a side of her I'd never seen before—unguarded, genuinely enthusiastic, without the layer of cool detachment she usually maintained.

The ride up was surprisingly companionable, our earlier hostility seemingly forgotten in the wake of shared laughter and snow-covered misadventures. We talked about snowboarding, about the best runs on the mountain, about the perfect conditions. Normal conversation, the kind that friends might have. The thought was as strange as it was unexpected.

When we reached the top, however, the bubble burst. Waiting near the unloading area was Madeline's usual crowd—Sam, Julian, Victoria, and the others. They looked surprised to see us together, expressions ranging from confusion to amusement to blatant disapproval.

Julian was the first to approach, his eyes moving between me and Madeline with obvious interest. "Well, well, if it isn't the snowboarding superstar," he said, his gaze fixed on me in a way that made me instantly uncomfortable. "Planning to give us all private lessons, or is my sister the only one who gets special treatment?"

There was something in his tone that made the comment feel less like friendly banter and more like an insinuation. I shifted awkwardly, suddenly very aware of how Madeline and I must look—flushed and disheveled from our snowball fight, clearly having spent the last hour enjoying each other's company.

"Just being a good Samaritan," I replied coolly, trying to maintain my composure. "Someone had to make sure she didn't break her neck."

Julian's smile didn't reach his eyes. "How heroic of you. But we can take it from here." He turned to Madeline. "Sam's been looking everywhere for you. Thought you might have actually killed yourself trying to snowboard."

Madeline glanced at Sam, who did indeed look relieved to see her in one piece, then back at me. There was a strange hesitation in her expression, like she wasn't quite sure what to do or say.

"I'm fine," she said finally, her voice taking on that familiar dismissive tone that had been absent during our time together. "Brooke was just showing me the basics. Turns out snowboarding isn't that hard after all."

"Not when you have such a dedicated teacher," Julian commented, his voice dripping with innuendo. He stepped closer to me, his smile turning into something that made my skin crawl. "Maybe you could teach me next? I bet you're really good with your hands."

Victoria snickered at this, while Audrey looked vaguely embarrassed. Sam frowned slightly but said nothing, seemingly unwilling to contradict his best friend.

I felt my face heat with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. This was exactly why I preferred to keep to myself—to avoid people like Julian Hayes and his particular brand of entitled arrogance.

Madeline shot her brother a look that could have frozen lava. "Shut up, Julian," she said sharply.

"No, it's fine," I replied coolly, looking Julian up and down with deliberate skepticism. "I only teach people who have potential. And somehow I doubt you'd be able to focus on the lesson, given how much effort it must take just to keep that oversized head of yours upright."

Victoria's snicker cut off abruptly, and Julian's smug expression faltered. Even Sam seemed to be fighting back a smile. Madeline's expression shifted slightly, the corner of her mouth twitching with what looked suspiciously like suppressed amusement.

Julian raised his hands in mock surrender. "Just making conversation." But I could tell by the slight flush on his face that my comment had hit its mark.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the group. I shifted my weight, eager to escape the suddenly tense atmosphere. "I think I'm going to take another run," I said, already edging away from them.

My eyes met Madeline's briefly, and something passed between us—an unspoken acknowledgment, perhaps, of the strange interlude we'd shared and the return to reality that had so abruptly followed. There was a flicker of something in her gaze that looked almost like regret, but it was gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

Without another word, I pushed off, eager to put as much distance as possible between myself and the uncomfortable scene. As I carved down the mountain, I tried to recapture the carefree feeling I'd had earlier, but it was elusive now, tainted by Julian's comments and the sudden reminder of where Madeline and I stood in the social hierarchy.

I didn't see Madeline again for the rest of the day. I continued riding until my legs began to feel heavy with fatigue. Despite wanting to squeeze in a few more runs, I knew better than to push myself too far. Snowboarding while tired was a recipe for injury—my mom had drilled that into me from day one. "The mountain will always be there tomorrow," she used to say, "but only if you're in one piece to enjoy it."

So when the first signs of exhaustion hit, I reluctantly called it a day and headed back to the resort, my body tired but my mind still frustratingly active.

Back in our room, I took a long, hot shower, letting the water soothe my sore muscles and wash away the remnants of the day. Then I changed into comfortable clothes, settled onto my bed, and pulled out my book—the same one Madeline had mocked the night before.

The familiar words were comforting, pulling me into a world far removed from the complexities of real life. I was so absorbed that I barely registered the passage of time until the door opened and Madeline walked in.

She looked tired but content, her cheeks still flushed from the cold, her hair slightly damp at the edges from melted snow. Without a word, she dropped her gear by the door and flopped onto her bed with a deep sigh.

The easy camaraderie we'd found on the mountain seemed to have evaporated. I kept my eyes on my book, though I found myself reading the same paragraph over and over, unable to focus with her presence so tangible in the room.

The afternoon light was beginning to fade outside our window, casting long shadows across the room. I glanced up from my book as Madeline's eyes began to close.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MADELINE

I was so exhausted. The day's snowboarding lessons with Brooke followed by hours with my friends had completely drained me. My muscles ached in places I didn't even know could ache. As soon as I got back to the room, I dropped my gear by the door and collapsed onto my bed with a deep sigh, feeling the tension begin to seep out of my body.

"Please don't fall asleep again," Brooke said sarcastically, barely glancing up from her book. "I'd rather not have to wake you for dinner and deal with the wrath that follows."

"I'm not sleeping," I mumbled, though my heavy eyelids were already threatening to betray me. "Just resting my eyes."

She made a noncommittal sound and returned to her reading. I watched her through half-closed eyes, noticing the way she seemed completely absorbed in whatever world existed between those pages. Whatever connection we'd formed during our time on the mountain seemed to have vanished, like footprints covered by fresh snow. We were back to being strangers sharing a room.

The silence stretched between us, broken only by the occasional sound of Brooke turning a page. I should have been grateful for the quiet after the noise and chaos of the day, but something about it felt stifling, uncomfortable.

"So," Brooke said eventually, her voice careful and measured. "You're actually pretty good at snowboarding. For a beginner."

I opened my eyes, slightly surprised that she'd initiated conversation. "Anyone can look good when they've got someone showing them what to do," I said with a half-shrug. "Not exactly rocket science."

A hint of a smile crossed her face before disappearing again. She turned another page, but I could tell she wasn't really reading anymore.

"Can I ask you something?" she said after another moment of silence.

"Depends on what it is," I replied, propping myself up on my elbows.

She seemed to consider her words carefully before speaking. "Why are you friends with those people?"

The question caught me off guard. "What people?"

"Your friends," she clarified, setting her book down on her lap, her gaze direct and unflinching. "Victoria, Audrey, Julian... even Sam sometimes. The girl I spent the morning with—the one who threw snowballs and laughed without caring who was watching—she seems different from the Madeline who hangs out with them."

I felt a defensive response rising in my throat, but something in her expression stopped me. She wasn't asking to be cruel; there was genuine curiosity there.

"They're not that bad," I said weakly, though the words sounded hollow even to my own ears.

Brooke raised an eyebrow. "Aren't they? The way Julian talked to me today... and the others just stood there. Including you, at first." She paused, then asked more quietly, "I guess I just don't understand who you're lying to—me? Them? Or yourself?"

The question hit me like a slap. Who did she think she was, judging my friendships, my choices? She had known me for what, a few weeks? And suddenly she thought she had me all figured out?

"That's pretty rich coming from someone who doesn't have any friends at all," I shot back, the words coming out sharper than I'd intended. "At least I know what it's like to be part of a group. What would you know about any of it?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. I saw something flicker across her face—hurt, maybe, before her expression hardened into a mask of indifference.

"You're right," she said coolly. "What would I know? I've only seen how they all left you alone on the mountain earlier today. And how your brother treats people. But clearly, I'm missing something about this amazing friendship dynamic you've got going on."

Her words hit closer to home than I wanted to admit. Just hours ago, when I fell on the mountain, they had all left when I insisted they go. Sam had wanted to stay, and I was the one who told him to leave. But why had he listened? Why hadn't he pushed harder to make sure I was okay? And Julian's behavior... well, that was Julian being Julian, but should I really accept that as normal?

But acknowledging that would mean admitting Brooke was right, and I wasn't about to give her that satisfaction.

"You don't know anything about my life," I said coldly. "So don't pretend you do."

She looked at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Madeline."

With that, she picked up her book again, effectively ending the conversation. I turned away, facing the wall, feeling a strange mixture of anger and something else—something that felt uncomfortably close to shame.

We didn't speak again for the rest of the evening. When the time came for dinner, we walked to the dining hall separately, maintaining a careful distance from each other. I sat with my usual crowd, laughing at Julian's jokes, responding to Victoria's gossip, holding Sam's hand beneath the table. I did everything right, played my part perfectly, but the whole time I could feel Brooke's words echoing in my mind.

Who are you lying to?

After dinner, we all gathered in the lodge's common area. Someone had started a fire in the massive stone fireplace, and the room was filled with the warm glow of flames and the excited chatter of students planning their runs for tomorrow. I curled up beside Sam on one of the oversized couches, my head on his shoulder, trying to focus on the conversation around me. But my gaze kept drifting to where Brooke sat alone in a corner armchair, her nose buried in that same book from earlier.

Eventually, the exhaustion of the day caught up with me. I said my goodnights and headed back to the room, my muscles aching pleasantly from the day's exertion. Brooke stayed behind in the common area, probably to avoid another uncomfortable conversation. Part of me was relieved for the solitude, but another part felt strangely disappointed.

I fell asleep quickly, my dreams a confused jumble of snowball fights and judging eyes and questions I couldn't answer.

When I woke the next morning, Brooke was already gone. Her bed was neatly made, her side of the room pristine, as if she'd never been there at all. I wasn't surprised—she seemed to have a habit of disappearing before dawn—but it still irritated me for reasons I couldn't quite articulate.

I took my time getting ready, not particularly eager to face the day or my friends after the strange mood that had followed me from last night's

conversation with Brooke. By the time I made it down to breakfast, the dining hall was already bustling with activity.

Victoria spotted me first, waving me over to the table where she sat with the usual group. Julian was in the middle of some story, gesturing animatedly while the others laughed. I slid into the empty seat beside Sam, who greeted me with a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," Julian teased, pausing his story. "Your roommate abandoned you again?"

I shrugged, reaching for the pitcher of orange juice. "She gets up early. Not everybody sleeps until noon like you do."

"Probably eager to hit the slopes before anyone can see how much of a show-off she is," Victoria commented, her voice dripping with disdain.

"She's not showing off," I said before I could stop myself. "She's just good at snowboarding."

Victoria raised an eyebrow, exchanging a look with Audrey that made my skin prickle with annoyance. "Since when are you defending Little Miss Perfect?"

"Yeah, Mads," Julian chimed in, his tone mocking. "Don't tell me you've actually started to like your charity case roommate?"

"She's not a charity case," I snapped, suddenly feeling a surge of defensiveness. "And maybe if you weren't so busy making crude comments yesterday, you'd have noticed she's actually a decent person."

A stunned silence fell over the table. Sam shifted uncomfortably beside me, while Victoria and Audrey stared at me like I'd grown a second head. Julian was the first to recover, his surprise quickly morphing into amusement.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Looks like someone's got a little girl crush on the snowboard nerd."

Heat flooded my cheeks, though whether from embarrassment or anger, I wasn't sure. "Don't be ridiculous. I just think maybe we could all try being a little less judgmental for once."

"Says the queen of judgment," Victoria muttered, rolling her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded, my voice sharper than intended.

"Come on, Mads," she scoffed. "You're the one who's constantly critiquing everyone and everything. Or did you forget that entire

conversation last month about how Leah's new haircut made her look like, and I quote, 'a sad poodle caught in a rainstorm'?"

I felt something twist in my stomach, a sick sort of realization that she was right. I did say things like that, all the time. When had I become that person? Had I always been that way?

"Whatever," I said, pushing my plate away and standing up. "I'm going to hit the slopes. I'll see you guys later."

"Wait, I'll come with you," Sam offered, starting to rise as well.

"No," I said quickly, perhaps too quickly based on the hurt that flashed across his face. "I kind of want to practice on my own for a bit. I'll catch up with you later."

Before anyone could protest further, I walked away, ignoring the whispers that immediately broke out behind me. I knew they were talking about me, probably speculating on what was wrong with me or why I was suddenly defending Brooke, of all people.

The thing was, I didn't really know myself.

Outside, the morning air was crisp and cold, the sky a brilliant blue that promised another perfect day on the mountain. I grabbed my snowboard from the equipment check and headed toward the lifts, my mind buzzing with conflicting thoughts.

Why had I defended Brooke? Why did Julian's comments bother me so much? And why couldn't I stop thinking about Brooke's question from last night?

Who are you lying to?

The worst part was, I didn't have an answer. I didn't know who I was anymore—or if I'd ever really known to begin with. I'd spent so long being what everyone expected me to be—the popular girl, the perfect girlfriend, the queen bee—that I wasn't sure what parts of me were real and what parts were just an act.

I was so lost in thought that I didn't even pay attention to which lift line I was entering. It wasn't until I was already seated and the chair was moving that I realized I wasn't alone.

Brooke sat beside me, looking just as surprised as I felt. She was bundled up in her snowboarding gear, a beanie pulled low over her ears, her helmet laying on the seat beside her, her cheeks already flushed from the cold. For a moment, neither of us spoke, the only sound the mechanical whir of the lift carrying us higher up the mountain.

Ten minutes. That's how long this lift ride would take to reach the top. Ten minutes trapped next to the last person I wanted to see right now—the girl whose words had been haunting me since last night, the girl I'd just inexplicably defended to my friends, the girl who somehow seemed to see right through me in a way that terrified me more than I cared to admit.

Ten long minutes with nowhere to go and nothing to do but face whatever uncomfortable conversation was about to unfold between us.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BROOKE

I'd woken before my alarm, that familiar excitement of a fresh powder day making it impossible to stay in bed. In the dim light, I could just make out Madeline's sleeping form. She looked different when she slept—younger, less guarded. I moved quietly through the room, not wanting to wake her. Truth be told, I enjoyed these early morning escapes. No one to deal with, just me and the mountain.

The resort was still quiet when I arrived, just a few serious skiers and snowboarders heading out for first tracks. I'd already gotten in several runs, each one better than the last. The snow was perfect—that ideal combination of grip and glide that makes for effortless carving down the mountain.

I was heading up for one more run before the crowds arrived when suddenly I wasn't alone anymore.

I don't know who was more surprised—me or Madeline. She slid into the seat beside me, looking just as startled as I felt. For a moment, we both sat in shock, neither quite ready to acknowledge what had just happened. My helmet rested on the seat beside me, leaving nothing between us but the uncomfortable silence.

"You left without waking me. Again," Madeline finally said, breaking the silence.

Of course that would be the first thing she said. Not "good morning" or "nice day for snowboarding." Just straight to accusations. Typical Madeline.

"I wasn't aware I was supposed to be your personal alarm clock," I replied, adjusting my beanie against the cold.

"That's not the point," she snapped. "It's just... rude. To keep disappearing like that."

"Rude?" I raised an eyebrow. "What's rude is expecting your roommate to wait around for you to wake up. Some of us actually like to make the most of the day."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "I never asked you to wait around. But a simple 'hey, I'm heading out' wouldn't kill you."

"You were asleep," I pointed out. "What was I supposed to do, shake you awake at five in the morning just to tell you I'm leaving?"

"You could leave a note or something." She tugged at her jacket zipper, pulling it higher.

"A note," I repeated flatly. "Right. 'Dear Madeline, gone snowboarding. Try not to fall on your face again. Best wishes, Brooke.'"

She fought back a smile at that, the corner of her mouth twitching despite her obvious attempt to maintain her annoyance. "You're impossible," she muttered, shifting away as much as the narrow lift seat would allow.

"I'm impossible?" The laugh that escaped me held no humor. "That's rich coming from you. You've spent the past few weeks making it abundantly clear you don't want anything to do with me. Now suddenly you care where I am and what I'm doing?"

"I don't care," she insisted, though something in her voice suggested otherwise. "I just think it's common courtesy to—"

"To what? Treat you like you're the center of the universe? News flash, Madeline: you're not."

Something in my stomach twisted at her words. Her demand for courtesy seemed hypocritical after weeks of barely acknowledging my existence. Yet a tiny voice in my head—one that sounded suspiciously like my mom—whispered that maybe I could have been more considerate.

We fell into silence again, both staring ahead at the mountain stretched out below us. The only sounds were the mechanical whirring of the lift and the distant shouts of skiers. My heart was hammering, though I wasn't sure if it was from anger or something else.

The lift swayed slightly in the wind, causing our shoulders to brush against each other. I shifted away quickly, pretending to adjust my position.

Seconds stretched into minutes. The silence grew heavier, more awkward. I found myself sneaking glances at her profile—the slight upturn of her nose, the way her blonde hair escaped from beneath her helmet, the curve of her jaw. I'd never really looked at her before, not like this.

Eventually, our eyes met. For once, there were no sharp words, no defenses—just blue eyes meeting brown. I could see flecks of darker blue in her irises, tiny details I'd never noticed before. I wondered if she could see

the dark green ring around my pupils, something my mom used to say made my eyes unique.

Thirty seconds of silent staring was about twenty-nine seconds too long for comfort.

"If I didn't know better," I finally said, "I'd think you actually missed me this morning."

A startled laugh escaped her. "In your dreams, Winters."

"Oh absolutely," I said with exaggerated seriousness. "I lie awake at night dreaming of quality time with Madeline Hayes. It's truly the highlight of my imaginary social calendar."

She laughed again—not the practiced laugh she used around her friends, but something genuine that transformed her face. She looked different when she really laughed, younger and more genuine. For a second, I caught a glimpse of who she might be without all the social pressure and expectations.

"You're such a smart-ass," she said, but there was no bite to her words now.

"Better than being a dumb-ass," I replied automatically.

That set us both off, our laughter hanging in the cold air between us. It was strange, this momentary truce. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed like this with anyone.

When our laughter subsided, something had changed. The tension was still there, but different now. The lift continued its slow ascent. We probably had about five more minutes before we reached the top.

"About your question last night," Madeline said suddenly, her voice quieter. "Why I'm friends with them..."

I looked at her, surprised. I hadn't expected an answer, especially not here.

"It's complicated," she continued, staring at her gloved hands. "We've been friends since forever, you know? Victoria and I were in the same kindergarten class. Julian's my twin, obviously. And the others... it's just always been that way. It's easy. Comfortable."

The way she said "comfortable" made it sound like a prison sentence.

"Even when they're not actually good friends?" I asked carefully.

She shrugged. "They're not all bad. And besides... who else would I be friends with? It's not like you can just... start over in high school. Everyone already knows who you are, who you're supposed to be."

Her words hit home harder than I wanted to admit. After my mom died, I became "the girl whose mother died," and that label shaped everything. The pitying looks, the whispers, the way conversations would die when I approached—it was suffocating.

"Maybe you can," I said softly. "Start over, I mean. Maybe not with everyone, but... with someone."

She looked at me then, really looked at me, something shifting in her expression. I saw a flash of the real Madeline—the one who had laughed during our snowball fight, who had picked up snowboarding with surprising determination, who sometimes seemed lost inside her own perfect life.

Before she could respond, her expression changed.

"So what's your excuse?" she asked, her tone lighter but with a curious edge. "Why don't you have friends? And don't give me some sarcastic non-answer. I answered your question."

The question caught me off guard. My mind raced for a response—something witty, something dismissive, something that wouldn't reveal too much. But images flashed through my head: my mother's funeral, the awkward condolences, the whispers that followed me through hallways.

I'd always kept to myself, even before my mom died. I preferred books to people, found more comfort in solitude than in forced social interaction. But after she was gone, those walls grew higher. Stronger. It wasn't just preference anymore; it was protection.

Maybe that's what Madeline and I had in common—we were both hiding, just in different ways. She hid in plain sight, surrounded by people but never truly seen. I hid in solitude, keeping everyone at a distance so they couldn't hurt me.

For a brief, disorienting moment, I wanted to tell her this. Maybe it was the mountain air, or the way she'd been honest with me. Whatever the reason, I found myself on the verge of opening up.

But then the lift station appeared ahead, saving me from having to answer.

"Oh, would you look at that," I said, relief washing over me. "We're here."

Madeline gave me a look that said she knew exactly what I was doing, but she didn't push it. We both prepared to disembark, gathering our gear.

"You're not getting off that easy," she warned, but there was no real threat in her voice. "This conversation isn't over."

"Isn't it?" I asked innocently, sliding forward as the lift reached the exit point.

We pushed off the lift, gliding in opposite directions—Madeline to the right, me to the left. I knelt to strap my free foot into my binding, perhaps focusing more intently than necessary on the task.

"Need help with that?" Madeline called over, surprising me again.

"I've been doing this since I was ten," I replied. "I think I can manage."

"Just trying to be helpful," she said with a small shrug.

"Wow, Madeline Hayes being helpful. Alert the media."

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the hint of a smile. "You know, you're not as funny as you think you are."

"And you're not as intimidating as you think you are," I shot back.

"I don't try to be intimidating."

I looked up at her, raising an eyebrow. "Right. And I don't try to be sarcastic."

That got another genuine laugh out of her. It was becoming addictive, making her laugh like that.

When I finished with my bindings and stood up, she was still there, waiting. For a moment, I thought she might suggest we take a run together. The idea was both appealing and terrifying.

"You know," she said, adjusting her poles, "you're actually not terrible company when you're not being a complete jerk."

"High praise coming from the queen of jerks," I replied, but there was no real heat in my words.

"I deserved that," she admitted with a small nod. "Well... see you around, I guess."

She lifted a hand in a small wave, then pushed off down the slope. Her form was surprisingly good for someone who'd just started snowboarding yesterday. I watched her go, feeling unexpectedly conflicted.

Part of me was relieved to return to my solitude. Another part—a part I wasn't ready to acknowledge—felt disappointed as she disappeared down the mountain.

I secured my helmet and pulled my goggles down. The mountain was waiting, ready to help me forget everything except the feeling of flying down its slopes. That should be enough. It had always been enough before.

I pushed off, feeling the familiar rush as my board cut through the snow. Wind whipped past my face, carrying away my troubled thoughts. For a

moment, I was free—no complications, no confusing feelings, just me and the mountain.

But even as I carved my way down the slope, one question lingered: Why couldn't I have just answered her?

The truth was simple: I was afraid. Afraid of letting people get close. I'd always kept my distance from others, but after Mom died, it became more than a habit—it became a shield. When you lose someone you love, you learn how deep pain can cut. It was easier to stay isolated than risk that wound again.

Except somehow, without my permission, Madeline Hayes had started to matter. And that terrified me more than I wanted to admit.

I leaned into a turn, focusing on the physical sensation to clear my head. For now, at least, I could outrun my feelings. I could lose myself in the mountain.

The rest would have to wait. Today, I would ride.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MADELINE

Well... see you around, I guess.

I cringed internally as the words left my mouth. Who says that? What was I, some awkward middle schooler talking to their crush? I pushed off down the slope, desperate to put some distance between myself and the embarrassment burning through me.

The mountain stretched out before me, pristine and welcoming—the perfect escape from whatever bizarre interaction I'd just had with Brooke. I focused on my form, trying to remember everything she'd taught me yesterday. Weight forward, knees bent, eyes on where you want to go. Simple enough.

Except my mind kept replaying those final moments on the lift. The way she'd dodged my question. The way she'd looked at me with those brown eyes—those surprisingly expressive eyes with that unique dark green ring around her pupils.

And that strange, inexplicable flutter in my stomach when she'd suggested I could start over. "Maybe not with everyone, but... with someone." What did that even mean? Was she suggesting—

My board caught an edge.

The world tilted violently. One second I was upright, the next I was face-down in the snow, my board twisted awkwardly behind me. Snow worked its way under my collar, icy against my skin. I lay there for a moment, catching my breath, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

First day on a snowboard, falls were expected. Second day? When I'd already shown I could handle it? Mortifying. At least no one had seen—

"You know, typically people watch where they're going instead of staring into space."

I looked up to find Brooke standing above me, her board unclipped from one foot, a mixture of amusement and concern on her face.

Great. Perfect. Just what I needed.

"I wasn't staring into space," I muttered, pushing myself up and brushing snow from my jacket. "I was just... thinking."

"Must have been some pretty intense thinking," she remarked, offering a hand to help me up.

I hesitated before taking it, surprised by how strong her grip was as she pulled me to my feet. "Thanks," I said, avoiding her eyes.

"You okay? That was a pretty good wipeout."

"I'm fine," I insisted, though my wrist ached where I'd tried to break my fall. "Just a bruised ego."

She studied me for a moment, then nodded toward the side of the run. "Want to take a break for a minute?"

I was about to refuse, to insist I was perfectly fine and didn't need her concern, but something stopped me. Maybe it was the way she asked without a hint of mockery. Or maybe I just needed a minute to collect myself.

"Sure," I said.

We moved to the edge of the run, finding a spot where we could sit without being in anyone's way. Brooke unclipped her board completely, setting it upside down in the snow so the bindings wouldn't collect ice. I did the same, mimicking her movements.

"So," she said after a moment, "what were you thinking about so hard that you forgot how to snowboard?"

I looked at her, ready to fire back a sarcastic response, but the genuine curiosity in her expression caught me off guard. For a second, I considered telling her the truth—that I was thinking about her, about that strange moment we'd shared on the lift, about how confusing it was to suddenly not hate someone you thought you'd always hate.

"Nothing important," I said instead.

She raised an eyebrow, clearly not believing me. "Right."

We sat in silence, watching other skiers and snowboarders make their way down the mountain. It was strangely peaceful. Sitting here with Brooke without arguing, without the constant tension that usually hung between us.

"You never answered my question," I said suddenly, breaking the silence. "On the lift. About why you don't have friends."

Something shuttered in her expression. "Didn't I? Must have slipped my mind."

"Come on," I pressed. "I answered yours. It's only fair."

"Life isn't fair," she shot back. "Besides, maybe I just prefer my own company. Not everyone needs a crowd to feel validated."

There it was—that wall she always put up, that reflexive sarcasm whenever something got too personal. It frustrated me more than it should have.

"Is it really that hard to give a straight answer for once?" I asked, my voice rising slightly. "Every time anyone tries to have an actual conversation with you, you throw up this... this shield of sarcasm and deflection. It's exhausting."

"I'm exhausting?" she said incredulously. "That's rich coming from you. At least I'm consistent. You're hot one minute, cold the next. One second you're yelling at me for waking you up, the next you're asking personal questions like we're best friends. Pick a lane, Madeline."

"I'm not the one who can't answer a simple question," I snapped. "Maybe if you weren't so closed off all the time, people might actually want to be around you."

The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Her face went blank, that careful, controlled expression that hid whatever she was really feeling. But I caught a flash of hurt in her eyes before she masked it.

"You're right," she said, her voice unnervingly quiet. "Maybe that's it."

"Brooke, I didn't mean—"

"No, it's fine." She stood up, reaching for her board. "We should keep going. The run isn't getting any shorter."

"Wait," I said, getting to my feet. "I'm sorry. That was a terrible thing to say. I just... I get frustrated when I feel like I'm the only one trying here."

She looked at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. "Trying what, exactly?"

What was I trying to do? I wasn't even sure myself. "I don't know. To understand you, I guess."

"Why?" The genuine confusion in her voice surprised me.

"Because..." I hesitated, searching for the right words. "Because you're not who I thought you were. And that makes me wonder what else I might be wrong about."

She sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. "Look, I'm sorry too. You're right—I deflect. It's a habit. But some questions are harder to answer than others."

"Fair enough," I conceded. "Can we just... move on? Pretend the last five minutes didn't happen?"

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "That eager to forget your outburst, huh?"

"Only when I say something stupid," I admitted, feeling a rush of relief at her softening expression.

"That must keep you pretty busy," she said, her smile widening into something genuine.

"Shut up," I laughed, surprised at how easy it suddenly felt between us. "Are we going to snowboard or what?"

She nodded, bending to strap her board back on. I did the same, and we pushed off down the mountain side by side.

We didn't talk much as we made our way down the run, but it wasn't the tense silence from before. It was almost... companionable. I found myself watching her movements, the effortless way she carved through the snow, her body in perfect sync with her board. She made it look so easy, so natural. There was something captivating about seeing someone do something they were truly good at.

Near the bottom of the run, I spotted a small café nestled among the trees, its wooden deck offering a perfect view of the valley below.

"Hey," I called out, pointing toward it. "Want to grab a hot chocolate or something?"

She looked surprised at the invitation, hesitating before nodding. "Sure."

We unclipped our boards outside the café, leaning them against the railing. The deck was mostly empty, just a few skiers finishing their drinks before heading back to the slopes. We found a table near the edge, with an unobstructed view of the mountains stretching out in all directions.

A server took our orders—hot chocolate for me, coffee for Brooke—and left us with the kind of silence that demanded to be filled.

"So," I said, casting around for a safe topic. "You mentioned you've been snowboarding since you were ten. Do you come up to the mountains a lot during winter?"

"Yeah," she replied, her fingers drumming lightly on the table. "We used to go on ski trips as a family. I started with skiing but switched to snowboarding as I got older."

The mention of family trips caused a subtle shift in her expression, a shadow passing briefly across her face. Again, I remembered what Julian

had mentioned, about the girl whose mom died a few years ago. *Could that actually be Brooke?*

That thought made me infinitely sad, though I couldn't imagine what it had been like for her.

"Your parents must have been into winter sports too," I said carefully.

A small smile appeared. "My mom loved the mountains. We'd come up here all the time as a family." She paused, seeming surprised at herself for sharing this. "Anyway, yeah. It's been a while."

And just like that, I knew.

My suspicions had been confirmed—Brooke was the girl Julian had been talking about.

Our drinks arrived, steam rising from the mugs. I wrapped my hands around mine, grateful for the warmth.

"What about you?" she asked. "You picked it up pretty quickly yesterday for someone who'd never done it before."

"I'm a fast learner," I said with a small shrug. "Plus, I had an decent teacher."

"Decent?" she repeated, raising an eyebrow. "What happened to excellent."

"That was beginner's awe. Now I know better," I teased, enjoying the mock offense on her face.

"Watch it, or I'll let you figure out the next challenging run on your own."

"Is that a challenge?" I asked, surprising myself with how much I liked the idea.

"It's a death wish," she retorted, shaking her head. "You're not ready for that yet."

Yet. The word hung between us, implying future lessons, future days on the mountain together. The thought sent an unexpected flutter through my chest.

A comfortable silence fell as we sipped our drinks, looking out at the view. The mountains seemed to go on forever, peak after snow-covered peak disappearing into the horizon. Against that backdrop, our usual school dramas and social hierarchies seemed incredibly small.

"Can I ask you something?" I said suddenly, a question forming in my mind.

"Depends on the question," she replied warily.

"Do you have a crush on Julian?"

The coffee she'd been drinking sprayed across the table as she choked in surprise. "What?" she sputtered, eyes wide with shock.

"My brother," I clarified unnecessarily. "I was just... wondering."

"You were wondering if I have a crush on your brother," she repeated slowly, as if trying to make sense of my question.

I nodded, watching her face closely. I wasn't even sure why I'd asked. The question had just popped into my head, a sudden curiosity about who Brooke might be interested in. I'd never seen her with anyone at school, never heard rumors about her dating life. And the way she'd interacted with Julian yesterday... I just wanted to know.

"Did he say something to make you think that?" she asked, frowning.

"Well, after yesterday on the mountain..." I trailed off vaguely, letting her assume what she wanted. I knew I was being dishonest, but admitting I'd made it up entirely seemed too embarrassing.

She stared at me for a long moment, then burst out laughing—a full, genuine laugh that turned heads at nearby tables. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," she said once she could speak again. "Your brother is the last person on earth I'd be interested in. No offense."

"None taken," I said, feeling strangely relieved. "Why is it so funny though?"

"Because he's—" She gestured vaguely. "He's Julian. He's arrogant and shallow and completely self-absorbed. Plus, he's your twin. That would be weird."

"Weird?" I echoed, not sure why that particular reason stood out.

"Well, yeah," she said, as if it were obvious. "You're..." She trailed off, something shifting in her expression. "You know what, never mind."

"No, what were you going to say?" I pressed, suddenly very interested in her answer.

She looked away, focusing intently on wiping up the coffee she'd spilled. "Nothing important."

"See? This is exactly what I was talking about before. You shut down the second anything gets remotely personal."

"And you push when people clearly don't want to be pushed," she shot back. "Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I don't want to share every thought that crosses my mind? That maybe some things are better left unsaid?"

"What could you possibly have been about to say that's so terrible?" I demanded, frustrated by her evasiveness.

"I was going to say that you're different from him," she said, her voice tight. "That despite everything, despite the act you put on at school and the friends you keep, there's something real about you. Something genuine that he doesn't have. And it would be weird to be interested in someone who's essentially a worse version of someone else." Her eyes widened slightly, as if she'd surprised herself with her honesty.

I sat back, stunned. Of all the things I'd expected her to say, that wasn't it. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh," she muttered, avoiding my gaze. "Can we talk about something else now?"

But I couldn't let it go. Something about what she'd said had hit a nerve. "What do you mean, 'the act I put on'?"

She sighed, running a hand through her hair in frustration. "Come on, Madeline. You know exactly what I mean. The perfect popular girl routine. The way you pretend to care about the same shallow things your friends do. The way you change depending on who you're with." She looked at me directly now, her eyes challenging. "The real question is, do you even know who you are when no one's watching?"

The words hit me like a physical blow. Because the truth was, I didn't know. I had spent so long being what everyone expected me to be—Victoria's best friend, Julian's twin sister, Sam's girlfriend, the queen of our social circle—that I had no idea who I was beneath all those roles. The realization was terrifying.

"That's not fair," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "You don't know me."

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But I know what it looks like when someone's pretending. And you're pretending so hard sometimes I wonder if you remember what's real."

I stood up abruptly, nearly knocking over my mug. "I don't have to listen to this."

She didn't try to stop me as I grabbed my coat and gloves. "Madeline..."

"Save it," I snapped, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but here, with anyone but her. "Thanks for the psychology session, but I didn't ask for your opinion on my life."

I stormed out of the café, leaving Brooke and my half-finished hot chocolate behind. My chest felt tight, my eyes burning with tears I refused to let fall. I grabbed my board and headed for the lift, needing the mountain's solitude to clear my head.

The worst part wasn't that she'd said those things. The worst part was that some small voice inside me whispered that she might be right. And I had no idea what to do with that thought.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

BROOKE

I sat alone at the café table for a long time after Madeline stormed out, staring at her half-finished hot chocolate. The mug was still warm, steam curling lazily into the air, as if she'd just stepped away for a moment and might return any second. But I knew better. The look on her face when she'd left—that mixture of hurt and anger—told me she wasn't coming back.

What had I been thinking? The words had tumbled out before I could stop them, cutting deeper than I'd intended. Do you even know who you are when no one's watching? It was a brutal question, maybe an unfair one. But something about Madeline Hayes made me reckless with my words, made me push boundaries I normally respected.

I sighed, rubbing my temples where a headache was beginning to form. The server approached, eyeing Madeline's empty seat.

"Everything okay? Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thank you," I replied, fishing out enough cash to cover both our drinks and a decent tip. "I'm heading out."

The mountain air felt sharper now, colder against my flushed cheeks as I strapped my board back on and pushed off down the slope. I tried to lose myself in the familiar rhythm of carving through snow, but my mind kept replaying our conversation, dissecting every word, every reaction. Usually, snowboarding cleared my head—the physical demands of it leaving no room for overthinking. Today, though, it failed me.

I took a few more runs, half-hoping to spot Madeline somewhere on the mountain, but she seemed to have vanished completely. By late afternoon, with the sun already beginning its descent behind the peaks, I decided to head back to the resort.

Back in our empty room, I paced restlessly. Part of me wanted to just let it go—let Madeline cool off, avoid another confrontation. But the longer I sat with it, the worse I felt. I had crossed a line, pushing too hard on

sensitive spots. Whatever game we were playing, whatever strange dance of antagonism and unexpected connection, I had taken it too far.

I checked the time. Dinner would be starting soon, and attendance was mandatory. Maybe Madeline would be there, and I could apologize then. Or maybe it would be better to wait until after, when we could talk privately without an audience.

With a sigh, I changed into clean clothes and headed down to the dining hall. The large room was already bustling with hungry students and teachers when I arrived. I scanned the crowd, searching for that familiar blonde head, but Madeline wasn't among them. Strange. She knew as well as I did that these group meals were required.

I filled my plate with food I didn't really want and found an empty seat at the end of a table, away from most of the chatter. Mr. Sinclair was making his rounds, checking attendance, his clipboard in hand. When he reached me, he paused.

"Ms. Winters, have you seen Ms. Hayes?"

I shook my head. "No, I haven't."

He frowned, making a note. "If you see her, remind her that dinner is mandatory. No exceptions."

As he walked away, I found myself wondering where Madeline was. Had our argument upset her so much that she was willing to risk getting in trouble just to avoid me? The thought made my stomach twist uncomfortably.

Midway through dinner, Victoria and Audrey entered, whispering to each other. They sat with Julian and Sam, but Madeline wasn't with them. I noticed Julian laughing loudly at something, clearly enjoying being the center of attention, while Sam kept glancing toward the door, as if expecting Madeline to arrive at any moment.

Something felt off about the whole scene. Where was Madeline? I pushed my food around my plate, my appetite completely gone now. The whole situation felt wrong, like I'd knocked over the first in a long line of dominoes and was now watching the chain reaction unfold.

After forcing down enough food to make it look like I'd eaten, I dropped off my tray and slipped out of the dining hall. I needed to find Madeline—not just to apologize, but to make sure she was okay. The fact that she'd missed mandatory dinner was concerning, especially given how much she usually cared about following rules when it suited her.

I needed to apologize. The realization settled in my chest, heavy and undeniable. Not just because we were stuck as roommates for the rest of the trip, but because I genuinely regretted hurting her. The admission surprised me—when had I started caring about Madeline Hayes's feelings?

After a quick shower and change, I steeled myself for what came next. Finding her. Apologizing. Two things that didn't come easily to me.

The resort's main lodge was busy with the after-skiing crowd, groups gathered around the roaring fireplace or clustered at tables with drinks in hand. I scanned the room, searching for that familiar blonde hair, but came up empty.

I approached a girl I vaguely recognized from school—Leah, maybe? She was in my English class, I thought.

"Hey," I said, the word feeling awkward in my mouth. I rarely initiated conversations with people I barely knew. "Have you seen Madeline Hayes?"

She looked surprised, probably wondering why I, of all people, was looking for Madeline. "I think I heard Victoria say something about the Timber Bar? It's that place about a five-minute walk from the resort."

"Thanks," I mumbled, already turning away.

The walk to the Timber Bar gave me time to rehearse what I'd say. A simple apology. Nothing dramatic. Just enough to clear the air so we could get through the rest of the trip without killing each other.

The bar was dimly lit, with exposed wooden beams and antler chandeliers casting a warm glow over the rustic space. It was crowded, mostly with locals by the look of them, though I spotted a few familiar faces from our school near the back. Not Madeline, though. Not yet.

I maneuvered through the crowd, my eyes scanning each corner. That's when I heard it—a familiar laugh, cutting through the noise. Julian Hayes. I spotted him by the bar, and if he was here, maybe Madeline was nearby too.

He was leaning against the bar, a beer in hand, surrounded by the usual crowd. Sam was there too, looking slightly uncomfortable as Julian held court. I hesitated, suddenly unsure about my plan. The last thing I needed was an audience for my apology.

But before I could decide whether to stay or go, Julian spotted me. His eyes lit up in a way that immediately put me on guard. That predatory gleam that made my skin crawl.

"Well, look who it is," he called out, loud enough to draw attention. "The snowboard prodigy herself. Come to show us more of your skills?"

I ignored him, scanning the bar for Madeline. That's when I spotted her, sitting alone at the far end of the bar, nursing what looked like a soda. Our eyes met briefly before she looked away, her expression unreadable.

I started to move toward her, but Julian stepped directly into my path, blocking my way. "Where are you rushing off to? The night's just getting started."

"Excuse me," I said, trying to step around him. "I need to talk to someone."

He moved with me, maintaining the blockade. "My sister, right? What's so urgent? Another snowboarding lesson scheduled? Or is it something more... personal?" The insinuation in his voice made my stomach turn.

"Julian," Sam said, a note of warning in his voice. "Come on, man."

Julian ignored him, his attention fixed solely on me. "You know, I've been thinking about it, and I just can't figure out why my sister suddenly seems so interested in spending time with you. It's not like you're actually friends."

I bit the inside of my cheek, determined not to take the bait. "Move, Julian."

"Or what?" he challenged, taking a step closer. The smell of beer on his breath made me want to gag. "You'll glare me to death? Or maybe you'll recite the periodic table until I pass out from boredom?"

"Stop," I said, my voice tight with controlled anger. "You're embarrassing yourself."

That hit a nerve. His smirk faltered, replaced by something harder, colder. "I'm embarrassing myself? That's rich coming from the girl with no friends, who spends all her time with her nose in a book because no one can stand to be around her."

I felt something crack inside me—a thin barrier between control and fury. "At least I'm not a pathetic, self-absorbed asshole who has to tear others down to feel good about himself."

The crowd around us had gone quiet, watching the exchange with morbid fascination. I caught a glimpse of Madeline over Julian's shoulder, now standing, her expression a mixture of shock and something else—concern, maybe?

Julian leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "You know what I think? I think you're jealous. Jealous of my sister, jealous of her life, jealous of everyone who has what you don't. It must be so hard, being so completely... forgettable."

The words hit their mark with devastating precision, finding all the bruised, vulnerable places inside me. For a second, I felt like that lost, grieving girl again—the one who became invisible after her mother died, the one who learned that being forgotten was worse than being disliked.

"You don't know anything about me," I managed, hating the way my voice wavered.

"I know enough," he said with a cruel smile. "I know your mom bit it a few years back, and you've been a walking ghost ever since. Maybe if you weren't so busy feeling sorry for yourself, people might actually—"

I didn't let him finish. My fist connected with his jaw before I even realized I was going to swing. Pain exploded across my knuckles, but the shocked look on his face was almost worth it. Almost.

The bar erupted in gasps and shouts. Julian staggered back, hand flying to his face, eyes wide with disbelief. Sam jumped forward, putting himself between us, while Victoria shrieked something unintelligible.

And there was Madeline, frozen at the edge of the commotion, her eyes locked with mine in a moment of perfect, stunned understanding.

I didn't wait for Julian to recover or for anyone to say anything. I turned and pushed my way through the crowd, bursting out into the cold night air, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. My hand throbbed, already beginning to swell, but I barely noticed as I half-walked, half-ran back to the resort.

By the time I reached our room, I was shaking, both from the cold and from the aftermath of adrenaline. I locked the door behind me and leaned against it, sliding down until I was sitting on the floor, cradling my injured hand against my chest.

What had I done? I never lost control like that, never let anyone get to me so completely. Julian's words shouldn't have mattered. He was just an ignorant jerk who didn't know the first thing about me. So why did it hurt so much?

Because he'd found the exact right spot, the raw, unhealed wound I tried so hard to protect. Because he'd made me feel exposed, vulnerable, seen in all the ways I didn't want to be seen. And because, deep down, a small part

of me feared he might be right. That I was forgettable. That I'd vanish completely if I wasn't careful.

Eventually, I dragged myself to my feet and into the bathroom. I turned on the shower as hot as I could stand it, hoping the steam and heat would wash away the memory of Julian's words, the feeling of my fist connecting with his face, the look in Madeline's eyes.

I stood under the scalding water until my skin turned pink, until the heat had melted away some of the tension in my shoulders. I was carefully not thinking about what would happen next—how Julian would retaliate, what Madeline would say when she eventually returned. I just focused on the water, the steam, the momentary escape.

I'd just turned off the shower when I heard the door to our room open and close. My heart jumped into my throat. Madeline was back. I stood frozen, water dripping onto the bathroom floor, suddenly unsure what to do.

After a moment of indecision, I quickly dried off and put on my sweatpants and hoodie, then cautiously opened the bathroom door, letting a cloud of steam escape into the cooler bedroom. Madeline was sitting on her bed, looking at me with an expression I couldn't read.

Without a word, she reached into her pocket and pulled out something, then tossed it across the room to me. I caught it reflexively with my injured hand, wincing at the flare of pain. It was a small instant ice pack.

"For your hand," she said simply.

I stared at the ice pack, then at her, surprise washing over me. After everything—our fight at the café, me punching her brother—this was the last thing I expected.

"Thanks," I managed, my voice raspier than I intended.

I activated the ice pack and pressed it against my swollen knuckles. The cold sent a shock through my system, but the relief was almost immediate.

Madeline was still in the same spot, as if she hadn't moved at all. I sat down on my own bed, facing her, the ice pack pressed to my hand.

"You left the bar," I said, stating the obvious because I didn't know where else to start.

She nodded. "Right after you did."

"Oh." I hadn't expected that. "I thought you'd stay with..."

"With who? Julian? After what he said to you?" She shook her head, a flash of anger crossing her face. "No way."

Madeline looked at me for a long moment, her blue eyes searching my face. "Why did you come looking for me at the bar?"

"Who said I was looking for you?" I said defensively, the response automatic. Old habits.

She raised an eyebrow, skepticism written across her face. "Please. Why else would you, of all people, voluntarily walk into a crowded bar? You hate people."

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it. She had a point.

"To apologize," I admitted with a sigh. "I felt bad about how we left things."

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "So your plan was to find me and apologize, but instead you ended up punching my brother in the face?"

"Not exactly how I planned it, no." I couldn't help the tiny smile that mirrored hers. "I'm sorry I hit Julian," I added, though the words lacked conviction.

"No, you're not," she replied instantly.

I met her eyes, the smile growing despite myself. "No, I'm not."

We shared a moment of surprising solidarity, a quiet understanding passing between us. Then her expression grew serious again.

"I know why you hit him," she said, leaning forward slightly. "But what exactly happened before you hit him? How did it start?"

The question hung between us, heavy with implications. I looked down at my injured hand, watching the ice pack slowly melt against my skin. The confrontation with Julian played through my mind again, a mixture of anger and hurt rising like a tide. Where would I even begin?

"Brooke," Madeline said softly, drawing my attention back to her. "Tell me everything."

CHAPTER TWENTY

MADELINE

Tell me everything," I said, watching Brooke carefully. She sat across from me, ice pack pressed against her swollen knuckles, shoulders tense like she was bracing for another hit—though this time, an emotional one.

Part of me couldn't believe what had just happened. Brooke Winters—quiet, bookish Brooke—had actually punched my brother. The scene kept replaying in my mind: her fist connecting with Julian's jaw, the stunned silence that followed, the way she'd fled the bar. There was something almost admirable about it, though I'd never admit that out loud.

"I went looking for you," she finally said, her voice soft. "After dinner. You weren't there, and I... I wanted to apologize for what I said at the café."

She looked at me, a flicker of something—maybe vulnerability—in her eyes. "I asked around, found out you might be at that bar. When I got there, Julian intercepted me before I could reach you."

"And then?"

Brooke's gaze dropped to her injured hand. "He was being Julian. Making comments, blocking my path. I tried to ignore him, but then he..." She hesitated, something vulnerable flickering across her face. "He brought up my mom."

Something cold settled in my stomach. "What did he say?"

"That I've been a 'walking ghost' since my mom died. That I'm forgettable. That no one wants to be around me because I'm too busy feeling sorry for myself."

Each word felt like a slap. The casual cruelty of it, the deliberate targeting of what was clearly a deep wound—it was Julian at his worst. I'd seen him do it before, find someone's weak spot and dig in mercilessly, but this felt different. More personal. More vicious.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words inadequate but sincere. "Julian can be such an asshole."

"Runs in the family," she replied, but there was a small smile playing at her lips that took the sting out of her words.

I smiled back, acknowledging the jab. "Touché. Though I prefer to think I've been evolving beyond the asshole stage. Slightly."

"Jury's still out on that one."

We both laughed, a brief moment of lightness in the heavy atmosphere. When the laughter faded, I found myself studying her face—the way her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled, the soft curve of her lips, the genuine warmth that transformed her face when she laughed without restraint.

"Your mom," I said carefully, not wanting to overstep but needing to know. "I heard she passed away a few years ago. I didn't realize until... well, until recently."

Brooke tensed, her body going still. For a moment, I thought she might shut down again, retreat behind that wall of sarcasm and deflection. But then she nodded slowly.

"Four years ago. Cancer." Her voice was steady, but I could hear the effort it took to keep it that way. "It was quick. Too quick, really. By the time they caught it, there wasn't much they could do."

The clinical way she described it couldn't mask the pain underneath. I thought about my own mom, who drove me crazy with her high expectations and constant criticism, but who was very much alive. The idea of losing her, whatever our relationship might be...

"I'm sorry," I said again, because what else could I say? "That must have been incredibly hard."

She shrugged, a gesture meant to seem casual but came across as protective. "It was what it was."

A silence fell between us, not quite uncomfortable but charged with unspoken things. Outside, snow had begun to fall, fat flakes drifting past our window, illuminated by the resort's exterior lights. It made our little room feel isolated, cocooned from the rest of the world.

"That book," I said, suddenly remembering our argument from days ago. "The one I made fun of. It was special to you, wasn't it?"

Brooke glanced at the worn paperback on her nightstand, a flicker of surprise crossing her face, maybe at the fact that I'd remembered or cared enough to ask.

"My mom gave it to me," she said quietly. "It was one of her favorites. We used to read together all the time, fantasy especially. She loved escaping into other worlds." A soft, sad smile touched her lips. "After she died, reading those books felt like... like I could still connect with her somehow. Like we were still sharing something."

The weight of her words settled over me. I thought about how callously I'd dismissed her reading, how I'd mocked something that was clearly a lifeline for her.

"I'm sorry about what I said," I told her, the apology unfamiliar but necessary. "About your book being boring. I didn't know it was important to you, but that's not an excuse. I shouldn't have said it."

She looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to determine my sincerity. "Thanks," she said finally. "It's okay. You couldn't have known."

"Still. I feel bad about it."

"Well, now we're even," she said with a small smile. "You made fun of my book, I punched your brother. Call it square?"

I laughed, surprised by how easy it was to laugh with her. "Deal. Though I think you definitely got the better end of that trade. Julian's had that coming for years."

"Happy to oblige," she replied, her smile widening to reveal a glimpse of perfect teeth.

The ice pack on her hand had turned soft, its cooling effect worn off. She set it aside, flexing her fingers gingerly, wincing slightly at the movement. Her knuckles were red and swollen, likely to bruise spectacularly by morning.

"That looks painful," I observed.

"Worth it," she said firmly, then sighed. "Though I guess I'll be hearing from Mr. Sinclair tomorrow. Punching another student probably violates some trip guidelines."

"Probably," I agreed. "But Julian won't report it officially. His ego couldn't handle admitting a girl punched him in front of everyone."

"Small mercies," she muttered.

We fell into silence again, but it wasn't the tense, loaded silence from earlier today or the awkward silence from our first days as roommates. It was almost... comfortable. Like maybe we'd finally found some common ground, some tentative path toward understanding each other.

I glanced at the clock, surprised to find it was only a little past ten. The night was still young, especially considering most places in town didn't close until much later. An idea formed in my mind, impulsive but appealing.

"Let's get out of here," I said suddenly, standing up.

Brooke looked confused. "What? Where would we go?"

"There's another bar in town, much better than that dive Julian dragged everyone to. The Mountain Goat. No chance of running into anyone from school there."

"And why would we want to go to a bar?"

"Because we've both had a day from hell," I explained, already moving to my suitcase to find something appropriate to wear. "Because we're both wide awake with adrenaline from everything that happened. Because I could use a drink after the day we've had, and I'm guessing you could too."

She hesitated, clearly torn. "I don't know..."

"Come on," I urged, surprising myself with how much I wanted her to say yes. "One drink. If it's terrible, we'll come right back."

Something shifted in her expression—a slight softening, a curiosity, maybe even a touch of excitement. "One drink," she agreed cautiously. "But I'm not changing."

I glanced at her outfit—simple black sweatpants and a hoodie that somehow looked better on her than it had any right to. "Fine. But I am. Give me five minutes."

I ducked into the bathroom with an armful of clothes, quickly applying some light makeup and changing into black jeans and a soft blue sweater that brought out my eyes. I let my hair down from its messy bun, brushing it out so it fell in loose waves around my shoulders. A touch of lip gloss, a spritz of perfume, and I was ready.

When I emerged, Brooke was waiting by the door, a slight nervousness evident in the way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She'd put on a blue beanie and dug up a clean hoodie—still casual, but intentionally so. She'd even dabbed something on her lips that made them look softer, pinker.

"What?" she asked when she caught me staring.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "You look nice."

A faint blush colored her cheeks, and she shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the compliment. "You too," she mumbled, almost inaudibly.

The resort was still bustling when we made our way through the lobby, guests gathered in small groups, enjoying drinks or playing board games by the fire. We slipped out unnoticed, stepping into the crisp winter night. Snow was falling more heavily now, blanketing everything in a layer of pristine white. Our breath formed clouds in the cold air as we made our way along the well-lit path toward town.

"Hope you know where you're going," Brooke said, pulling her beanie lower to cover her ears. "Because all I see is a wall of white."

"Trust me," I replied, then paused. "Actually, don't. That's probably terrible advice."

She laughed, the sound sharp and clear in the quiet night. "At least you're self-aware."

The Mountain Goat was a small, rustic bar tucked away on a side street, with warm yellow light spilling from its windows and a hand-carved wooden sign swinging gently in the breeze. Inside, it was cozy and surprisingly uncrowded—just a few locals seated at the bar and a couple of tables occupied by what looked like hotel staff unwinding after their shifts.

We found a small booth in the corner, sliding in across from each other. A waitress approached almost immediately, her smile welcoming.

"What can I get you ladies tonight?"

"Whatever local beer you'd recommend," I said, then glanced at Brooke questioningly.

"Same," she echoed with a small nod.

Once the waitress left, Brooke looked around, taking in the decor—old ski equipment mounted on the walls, vintage photographs of the mountain in its early days, strings of small white lights crisscrossing the ceiling.

"This place is nice," she admitted. "How'd you find it?"

"Julian mentioned it earlier today, actually. Said it was too 'local' for his taste, which I took to mean it was probably perfect."

She smiled at that. "Your brother has terrible taste."

"In most things, yes," I agreed, leaning forward slightly. "Except in friends. Sam's actually decent, despite being Julian's best friend since kindergarten."

"And Victoria? Audrey? Are they 'actually decent' too?" Her tone was curious rather than accusatory.

I considered the question seriously. "They're... complicated. Victoria can be vicious, but she's also been there for me during some rough times."

Audrey follows Victoria's lead, though I sometimes think she'd be different on her own. And Sophie's actually pretty kind, just desperate to fit in."

"So why do you hang out with them? If they're not always great people?"

It was the same question she'd asked on the ski lift, though her tone was gentler now, less confrontational. The waitress returned with our beers, giving me a moment to collect my thoughts.

"Habit, partly," I said once we were alone again. "We've been friends forever. But also... I don't know. Safety, maybe? There's something secure about having a defined place in the social hierarchy, even if it's not always comfortable."

"Even if it means compromising who you are?" she asked softly.

I took a sip of my beer to avoid answering immediately. The question hit too close to what I'd been wrestling with myself. "I'm not sure I know who I am without all that," I admitted finally. "That probably sounds pathetic."

"No," she said, surprising me. "It sounds human. We all construct identities based on our circumstances, our relationships. The tricky part is figuring out which parts are really us and which parts are just... adaptations."

I studied her face, noticing the thoughtful set of her mouth, the way she seemed to be speaking from personal experience. "Is that why you keep people at a distance? To maintain your 'real' identity?"

She laughed, but there was a note of sadness in it. "More like self-preservation. Can't get hurt if you don't let people close enough to hurt you."

"Because of your mom?"

She nodded slowly. "Partly. Losing her...it was like the ground disappeared from under me. Nothing felt secure anymore." She traced her finger through the condensation on her glass. "But it was also the way people reacted afterward. The pity, the awkwardness, the way some friends just...faded away. It was easier to pull back than to keep facing all that."

I'd never thought about grief that way—as something that changed not only your relationship with the person you lost but with everyone else too. The insight made me see Brooke differently, understanding her isolation as a form of protection rather than simply antisocial behavior.

"That sounds lonely," I said quietly.

"It can be, sometimes," she answered, her honesty disarming. "But it's also safe."

"Safe isn't always better though, is it?"

Our eyes met across the table, and something electric passed between us—a moment of recognition, of unexpected connection. We were so different, Brooke and I, yet in that moment, I felt understood in a way I rarely experienced.

"No," she agreed. "It's not."

We sipped our beers in companionable silence, letting the admission settle between us. Around us, the bar hummed with quiet conversation, occasional laughter, the clink of glasses. It felt separate from the rest of our lives, a bubble of time where normal rules and roles didn't apply.

"So," I said eventually, eager to move to lighter territory.

"Snowboarding. Where did you learn?"

The question opened a floodgate. Brooke's face lit up as she talked about learning to snowboard, her early falls and eventual mastery, trips to different mountains. It was the most animated I'd ever seen her, hands gesturing expressively, eyes bright with enthusiasm. She talked about her mom teaching her to ski first, then her transition to snowboarding as a teenager, the freedom she felt on the mountain.

I found myself watching her lips as she spoke, the way they curved around certain words, the flash of her teeth when she smiled. There was something mesmerizing about seeing her like this—unguarded, passionate, alive. A strange flutter started in my stomach, a feeling I couldn't quite name.

"Sorry," she said suddenly, noticing my silence. "I'm talking way too much."

"No, don't apologize," I assured her. "It's nice, seeing you excited about something."

That slight blush returned to her cheeks. "Well, what about you? What gets Madeline Hayes excited besides being the queen of the social hierarchy?"

The way she said it—teasing but not mean—made me laugh. "Art," I admitted, thinking of my hidden sketches. "Drawing, painting. I've always loved it, though my parents think it's a waste of time."

"That's why your room is full of art," she remembered. "You're actually good. Like, really good."

"Thanks," I said, feeling an unexpected warmth at her praise. "It's the one thing that feels completely mine, you know? Not influenced by

expectations or other people's opinions. Just... me."

"I get that," she nodded. "That's how snowboarding is for me. And reading, I guess."

"We should trade sometime," I suggested impulsively. "You could recommend a book you think I'd actually like, and I could... I don't know, draw something for you."

The idea seemed to surprise her as much as it did me. "You'd draw something for me?"

"Sure, why not?" I tried to sound casual, though the idea of creating something specifically for Brooke made my heart beat a little faster for some reason. "Consider it further apology for being an asshole about your book."

"Deal," she said, a slow smile spreading across her face. "Though we both know I've got the harder task. Finding a book that Madeline Hayes would deign to read? Nearly impossible."

"Oh please, I read," I protested.

"School-assigned books don't count."

"I've read plenty of non-school books!"

"Name three," she challenged, eyes sparkling with mischief.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, realizing I'd walked right into her trap. "Okay, fine, maybe I'm more of a magazine person. But that's still reading."

She laughed, a full, genuine laugh that made something shift in my chest. "I'll find you something good. Something that will blow your mind."

"I look forward to it," I said, surprised to find I meant it.

We ordered another round of beers, falling into an easy conversation that meandered from subject to subject—favorite movies (she loved old classics, I preferred action and romance), music (we both had a secret fondness for '80s hits), places we wanted to travel someday. It was surprising how easy it was to talk to her, how the time seemed to slip away.

"Okay, I've got one for you," I said after our third beer, feeling warm and slightly buzzed. "Best memory from childhood. Go."

She thought for a moment, her eyes drifting to the middle distance. "My tenth birthday. My parents surprised me with a weekend trip to this little cabin by a lake. No special reason, just the three of us swimming and hiking and making s'mores. Simple, but perfect."

The wistfulness in her voice made my heart ache for her. "That sounds really nice."

"It was," she agreed softly. "Your turn."

I searched my memories, trying to find one that felt as genuine as hers. "When I was eight, I got really sick—some kind of flu. I had a high fever, felt terrible. Julian was at a friend's house, and my parents had some charity event they couldn't miss, so our housekeeper was supposed to watch me."

"Sounds like a great memory so far," Brooke said dryly.

"Wait, it gets better," I assured her. "After my parents left, our housekeeper—Lucía—decided I needed more than just medicine. She brought a TV into my room, something strictly forbidden normally, and we had this impromptu movie marathon. She made homemade soup, built a fort on my bed with extra blankets, and stayed with me the whole night, even after her shift was supposed to end."

I smiled at the memory, the feeling of being cared for so completely, so unselfishly. "When my parents came home and found us both asleep in this ridiculous blanket fort with the TV still on, I thought she'd get in trouble. But instead, my mom just smiled—not her usual polite smile, but a real one. She thanked Lucía for taking such good care of me, and after that, things were different. Warmer, somehow. At least for a while."

Brooke was watching me intently, a soft expression on her face. "That's a beautiful memory."

"Yeah," I agreed. "One of my best."

Our eyes met across the table, and I felt that strange flutter again, stronger this time. We'd moved past the superficial conversations of acquaintances, beyond the barbed exchanges of enemies, into something new and undefined.

It was almost midnight when we decided to head back to the resort. Outside, the snow had stopped, leaving everything blanketed in a fresh layer of white that glittered under the streetlights. The air was cold and clear, stars visible in patches between scattered clouds.

"Thanks for dragging me out tonight," Brooke said as we walked. "It was... actually really nice."

"Don't sound so surprised," I teased, bumping my shoulder gently against hers. "I occasionally have good ideas."

"Very occasionally," she agreed with a smile.

We walked in comfortable silence, our breaths forming small clouds that mingled in the space between us. I was acutely aware of her presence beside me—the soft sound of her footsteps in the snow, the faint smell of her shampoo when the breeze blew just right, the way the moonlight caught in her dark hair.

What was happening to me? This warmth I felt around her, this strange pull—it wasn't something I'd experienced before. Or if I had, I'd never allowed myself to acknowledge it. With Brooke, though, it was becoming harder to ignore.

When we reached the resort, the lobby was quiet, just a few night owls still gathered by the dying fire. We took the stairs to our floor, our footsteps muffled by the plush carpet. At our door, Brooke fumbled with the key, her injured hand still clumsy.

"Here, let me," I offered, taking the key from her.

Our fingers brushed during the exchange, a brief contact that sent an unexpected jolt through me. I tried to ignore it, focusing on unlocking the door, but I could feel her watching me, standing close enough that I could sense her warmth.

Inside our room, the air felt charged somehow, as if the easy camaraderie we'd found at the bar had transformed into something more complicated, more intense. I busied myself with taking off my coat, suddenly unsure what to do with my hands, my eyes, my racing thoughts.

"That was fun," I said finally, breaking the silence. "We should do it again sometime."

Brooke looked at me with those thoughtful brown eyes, a small smile playing at her lips. "Are you suggesting we hang out voluntarily? Outside of this trip?"

"Maybe," I said, my voice softer than intended. "Would that be so terrible?"

She studied me for a long moment, something shifting in her expression. "No," she said finally. "Not terrible at all." Then she added, "It's a date." Her eyes widened slightly. "Well, not a date date, obviously. Just a...hang out thing. Not that you're not—I mean, you're obviously—" She gestured vaguely at me, her usual composure completely absent. "You know what I mean. You're...and I'm just...oh god." She ran a hand through her hair, a flush creeping up her neck. "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

I stared at her, caught off guard by this completely different version of Brooke. Gone was the sarcastic, confident girl who always seemed to have a quick comeback. In her place was someone flustered, nervous, endearingly awkward. It was bizarre seeing her like this—Brooke Winters, at a loss for words—but there was something captivating about it too. Something that made that strange flutter in my chest intensify.

"Yeah," I said, unable to hold back a smile. "You're rambling. It's...cute."

We stood there, suspended in that moment of possibility, neither moving closer nor pulling away. The silence stretched between us, charged with something I couldn't—or perhaps didn't want to—name. My heart was beating too fast, my thoughts racing in directions that both thrilled and terrified me.

"I should go check on Sam," I blurted suddenly, desperate to break the tension. "I, um, need to get something from his room. For tomorrow."

The words tumbled out unnaturally, a transparent excuse even to my own ears. Something flickered across Brooke's face—a brief shadow of disappointment, quickly masked by her usual neutral expression.

"Oh," she said, her voice carefully level. "Sure. Tell him I said hi."

The sarcasm in her last words was gentle, almost affectionate, which somehow made it worse. I nodded, unable to meet her eyes, suddenly desperate for air that didn't feel so heavy with unspoken things.

"I won't be long," I promised, though I had no idea if that was true. I just needed space, needed to escape this confusing tangle of emotions that seemed to tighten around me whenever I was near her.

"No rush," she replied, already turning away, reaching for her book on the nightstand. "I'll probably just read for a bit."

I grabbed my key card and practically fled the room, closing the door perhaps a little too firmly behind me. The hallway was mercifully empty, the plush carpet muffling my hurried footsteps as I made my way toward the stairs. I had no real destination in mind—Sam was probably with Julian, and the last person I wanted to see right now was my brother.

What was happening to me? This wasn't like me at all. I was Madeline Hayes—confident, self-assured, always in control. Yet here I was, running away from a quiet moment with Brooke like it threatened everything I thought I knew about myself.

I reached for my phone to text Sam, only to find my pocket empty. With a sigh of frustration, I realized I'd left it back in the room—probably on my

nightstand or fallen between the sheets. Now I'd have to go back and face Brooke again, with no real explanation for my abrupt departure.

I made my way back to our room, my footsteps slowing as I approached the door. What would I say? How would I explain?

Sorry I ran out like that. I just couldn't handle how you make me feel. How was that for honest?

I paused outside our door for a moment, gathering courage for what should have been the simple act of entering my own room. My heart was racing, my palm sweaty against the key card. This was ridiculous. I was being ridiculous.

It's just Brooke, I told myself. Just your roommate. Your chemistry tutor. The girl who punched your brother. The girl whose laugh makes your chest feel tight, whose eyes you can't stop thinking about, whose presence has somehow become both comforting and terrifying at once. *Oh fuck me.*

With a deep breath, I raised my hand to knock, then changed my mind and swiped the key card instead. Whatever awaited me on the other side of that door, I'd have to face it eventually.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BROOKE

The door clicked shut behind Madeline, leaving a strange emptiness in the room that seemed to expand with each passing second. I stood there, frozen in the same spot where our conversation had ended so abruptly, my mind replaying her hasty exit like a scene from a movie I couldn't quite understand.

I should go check on Sam.

Her words hung in the air, an excuse so transparent it almost hurt. One moment we'd been sharing something real—something that felt dangerously close to connection—and the next, she was gone, fleeing whatever had passed between us like it was something to be feared.

I moved to my bed and sank down onto the edge, my injured hand throbbing dully as a physical reminder of everything that had happened today. It had been the strangest day of my life—punching Julian, arguing with Madeline, then somehow ending up at a bar with her, laughing and talking like we'd been friends for years instead of reluctant roommates who barely tolerated each other.

I lay back, staring up at the ceiling, watching shadows from the trees outside dance across the textured surface. Every moment from the evening played in my mind like fragments of a dream I couldn't quite believe was real. The way Madeline had leaned forward when she laughed, the slight brush of her fingers against mine when she reached for her drink, how her voice had softened when she talked about her childhood memory with Lucía.

"It's not a big deal," I whispered to the empty room. "She's just... different when she's away from her friends."

But it felt like a big deal. It felt like witnessing something rare and precious—Madeline Hayes without her armor, without the practiced smile and calculated words. Just Madeline, with her love of art and her surprising

vulnerability and her genuine laugh that seemed to light up something long-dormant inside me.

I rolled onto my side, frustration creeping in around the edges of these confusing thoughts.

"Why does she always have to leave like that?" I muttered, plucking at a loose thread on the comforter. "Why did she look disappointed when she walked out? Did I do something wrong?"

The questions multiplied, each one spawning three more until my head felt too full to contain them all. I reached for my book—my faithful escape route—but found myself staring at the same paragraph over and over, the words blurring into meaningless shapes as my mind refused to focus on anything but the lingering scent of Madeline's perfume in the air.

With a sigh, I set the book aside and stared at the ceiling again. My thoughts drifted to Sam—perfect, golden Sam with his easy smile and unwavering loyalty. Of course she went to him. He was her boyfriend, after all. They had the perfect relationship to match their perfect social status, sharing private moments and intimate conversations I could never be part of.

"That's what normal people do," I told myself. "Go to their boyfriends when they feel weird or confused."

A hollow feeling spread through my chest, an ache so familiar it was almost a comfort in its predictability. "So why does it feel like she just walked out on me?"

I'd been here before—this moment of almost-connection that slipped away before it could fully form. It was the story of my life after Mom died. Friends who couldn't handle my grief, who drifted away with promises to call that never materialized. The girl from my English class who'd invited me to her birthday party, then spent the whole night talking to everyone but me. My dad, physically present but emotionally absent, lost in his own pain.

Everyone always left before I could find the words to make them stay.

The memory of my fourteenth birthday rose unbidden—the first one after Mom died. I'd spent the whole day waiting for someone, anyone, to remember. By evening, when even my dad had forgotten, I'd blown out a single candle on a cupcake I'd bought myself, making a wish I knew wouldn't come true: *Please don't let me be alone forever.*

I pushed the memory away, sitting up with sudden determination. This was ridiculous. Madeline Hayes was not someone whose absence should

hurt me. We weren't even friends, not really. One nice evening didn't erase years of dislike.

The room felt suddenly stifling, too small to contain the storm of emotions churning inside me. I needed to do something, anything, to quiet my racing thoughts.

Sleep. I needed sleep. Tomorrow would reset everything, return us to our normal dynamic—me the quiet outcast, her the untouchable queen. Tonight was just a momentary detour, a strange blip in our otherwise predictable hostility.

I stood up, the floorboards creaking softly beneath my feet. The silence of the room pressed against my ears—no humming air conditioner, no distant traffic, just the soft whisper of my own breathing and the muffled sounds of the resort settling into its nighttime rhythm. I moved to my suitcase, pulled out my sleep shirt, and placed it on the bed.

I reached for the hem of my hoodie, tugging it over my head, the soft fabric brushing against my skin as it came off. I stood there in just my bra and sweatpants, goosebumps rising on my arms in the cool night air.

The sound of my hoodie hitting the floor seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet room. I could hear my own heartbeat, steady but somehow prominent, as if the world had narrowed to just this—my body in this space, existing in this moment of strange, suspended anticipation.

I stretched, feeling the pleasant pull in my muscles, a reminder of the long day on the slopes. My back was to the door as I reached for the clean t-shirt I'd laid out earlier. The cool air caressed my skin, raising more goosebumps along my spine and across my shoulders.

There was a flutter in my stomach, a strange sense of expectancy that made no sense. I was alone. Nothing was about to happen. And yet, my body seemed to be waiting for something my mind couldn't name.

The sound of the door opening caught me completely off guard.

"Forgot my—"

I turned instinctively toward the voice, my heart leaping into my throat as I found myself face to face with Madeline. Her sentence cut off abruptly, the last word—"phone"—hanging unspoken in the air between us for several long seconds before she finally pushed it past her lips.

Her eyes widened, her gaze dropping from my face to my exposed upper body with an expression I couldn't quite read. It wasn't her usual judgmental stare, the one that made me feel like I was being measured and found

wanting. This was something else entirely—something that made heat rise to my cheeks despite the cool air on my skin.

Time seemed to slow, stretching each second into an eternity. I could see the slight parting of her lips, the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing quickened.

I was suddenly, acutely aware of my body in a way I hadn't been moments before—the defined muscles of my abdomen that I'd earned through countless hours at the gym, the toned lines of my shoulders and arms that most people never saw beneath my usual layers of clothing.

"Are you staring at me?" The words left my mouth before I could stop them, landing somewhere between accusation and amusement.

Madeline blinked rapidly, as if coming out of a trance. "No, I'm not."

A grin tugged at the corner of my mouth, a strange confidence washing over me. "Yeah, you were." I couldn't resist adding, "Listen, I'm not judging you. I'd stare at me too."

The flush that crept up her neck to her cheeks was fascinating—Madeline Hayes, flustered was a sight I never thought I'd see. She moved then, stepping into the room toward the nightstand where her phone lay. To reach it, she had to walk past me, close enough that I could smell the faint trace of her perfume, something floral and expensive that seemed to wrap around my senses.

We stood just inches apart, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from her, could see the slight tremble in her hands as she reached for her phone. Something electric hung in the air between us, a tension unlike anything I'd experienced before—not the antagonistic friction of our earlier encounters, but something deeper, more primal. Something that made my heart race and my breath catch in my throat.

I could hear each shallow breath she took, feel the slight disturbance in the air between us. The world outside this room—the resort, the mountain, everything—seemed to fade away until there was nothing but this moment, this proximity, this unbearable tension stretching between us like a thread pulled too tight.

Her eyes met mine, blue depths swirling with confusion and something else, something that mirrored the strange ache building in my chest. Her lips parted slightly, and for one wild, irrational moment, I wondered what they would taste like.

"I should go," she whispered, her voice barely audible even in the quiet room.

And then she was gone again, the door closing behind her with a soft click that somehow echoed in the emptiness she left behind.

I stood there, frozen, my t-shirt still clutched forgotten in my hand. What had just happened? What was this feeling that seemed to hollow out my chest, leaving only a strange, aching hunger in its place?

Is this what friendship feels like?

But even as the thought formed, I knew it wasn't quite right. Friends didn't make your skin burn where their gaze touched it. Friends didn't leave you breathless with just their proximity. Friends didn't make you wonder about the softness of their lips.

I pulled on my t-shirt with trembling hands, trying to steady my racing thoughts. This was ridiculous. This was *Madeline Hayes*—the girl who'd looked down on people like me for years, who'd only recently stopped treating me like something stuck to the bottom of her designer shoes. Whatever I was feeling was just... confusion. The unfamiliarity of having someone break through my isolation, of allowing myself to care even a little about another person.

It wasn't *her* specifically. It couldn't be.

I moved to the window, gazing out at the snow-covered landscape, the moonlight turning everything to silver and shadow. Where had she gone? Back to Sam, obviously. The golden boy, the perfect boyfriend. I pictured them together—his hands in her hair, his lips on hers—and felt something twist painfully in my stomach.

Are they having sex right now?

The thought rose unbidden, unwelcome, sending a wave of something that felt disturbingly like jealousy through me. Why should I care what Madeline did with her boyfriend? Why should the image of them together make me feel like I'd swallowed broken glass?

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the window, trying to extinguish the heat that had risen to my face. Outside, a few late-night revelers trudged through the snow, their laughter carrying faintly through the glass. Normal people, having normal fun, without this confusing storm raging inside them.

I turned away from the window, anger at myself rising like a tide. This was exactly why I kept people at a distance. Caring about people only led to

pain. They either left you or disappointed you—or both. It was foolish to think Madeline would be any different. She had her perfect life, her perfect boyfriend, her perfect friends. Whatever momentary connection we'd shared tonight was just that—momentary. A curious detour from her real life, nothing more.

Tomorrow, she'd probably be back to being Madeline Hayes, queen bee. And I'd be back to being nobody.

I slipped into bed, pulling the covers up to my chin like a shield against the confusion and hurt swirling inside me. I closed my eyes, willing sleep to come, but every time I did, I saw her face—the way she'd looked at me when she walked in, like I was something unexpected, something that shook her carefully constructed world.

She'd looked at me like I was something she'd never seen before.

Hours passed, the soft ticking of the bedside clock marking time in the darkness. I drifted in and out of restless dreams, always waking to the same empty room, the other bed still perfectly made, untouched.

Where was she? Had she stayed with Sam the entire night? The questions circled endlessly, refusing to let me rest.

I thought about all the times people had walked away from me—the friends who couldn't handle my grief after Mom died, the classmates who stopped inviting me places, the father who was physically present but emotionally absent, lost in his own pain. Everyone always left in the end.

Why had I let myself believe, even for a moment, that Madeline might be different?

I curled onto my side, pulling my knees up to my chest, making myself small against the vastness of these feelings I couldn't name. My heart was still pounding, hours after that moment of electric tension. I was confused, exhausted, and something else—something that felt dangerously close to longing.

"I wish she hadn't walked out," I whispered to the darkness, the admission barely audible even to my own ears.

The darkness offered no answers, just the hollow ache of another person slipping through my fingers like snow melting in the palm of my hand—there for a moment, then gone, leaving nothing but the cold memory of their brief warmth.

Outside, the moon tracked its path across the sky, indifferent to the small human dramas playing out beneath its silver light. And inside, I lay awake,

wondering when I'd become the kind of person who cared where Madeline Hayes spent her nights, and why the thought of her with someone else felt like a wound I hadn't seen coming.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MADELINE

I fled.

There was no other word for it. I grabbed my phone, mumbled something about leaving, and escaped our room like it was on fire. The door clicked shut behind me, and I stood in the hallway, my heart hammering against my ribs as if trying to break free.

What had just happened in there?

The image of Brooke was seared into my mind—standing there in just her sweatpants and bra, her back turned to me at first, then the slow turn that revealed the lean muscles of her abdomen, the defined shoulders, the unexpected size of her arms. I hadn't been prepared for that. For any of it.

"Are you staring at me?"

Her voice echoed in my head, playful and confident. So different from the guarded, sarcastic Brooke I was used to. And I had stared—I couldn't deny it, though I'd tried. Something about seeing her like that had short-circuited my brain, left me speechless in a way I'd never experienced before.

I moved down the hallway without any clear destination, just needing to put distance between myself and whatever had just transpired in that room. The resort's plush carpet muffled my footsteps as I wandered, my thoughts in complete disarray.

"It's not like I like her," I whispered to myself, the words sounding hollow even to my own ears. "I don't. I can't."

I couldn't like Brooke Winters. That made no sense. First of all, she's a girl. I like boys—I've always liked boys. I have a boyfriend, for god's sake. Girls don't look at other girls the way I looked at Brooke tonight. They just don't.

And beyond that, she was... she was Brooke. Quiet, sarcastic, judgmental Brooke who read too much and spent too much time alone and looked at me like she could see straight through all my carefully constructed walls.

Brooke who had punched my brother.

Brooke who had taught me to snowboard with surprising patience.

Brooke who had shown me who she really was tonight at that bar—thoughtful, funny, surprisingly wise.

Brooke whose smile, when it was genuine, made something flutter inside my chest that I didn't have a name for.

"Stop," I hissed at myself, coming to a halt in the middle of an empty corridor. "Just stop."

I ran a shaky hand through my hair, trying to ground myself. This was ridiculous. I had a boyfriend—Sam, sweet, dependable Sam who everyone adored. I had friends, popularity, a clearly defined place in the world. I couldn't throw all that into chaos just because seeing Brooke half-dressed had made my pulse race and my mouth go dry.

It was nothing. Just surprise, that's all. I hadn't expected her to look like... that. Hidden beneath her usual baggy clothes and standoffish demeanor was a body that spoke of discipline, strength, hidden capabilities. It was natural to be startled by the revelation, natural to feel... something.

But not this. Not this confusing storm that had my thoughts spinning and my heart racing like I'd run a marathon.

I needed fresh air. That was it. Too much time in this stuffy resort, too many beers at the bar earlier. Clear my head, and everything would make sense again.

I made my way to a side exit, pushing through the door into the crisp night air. The cold hit me immediately, biting through my thin sweater, but I welcomed it. The sharp sting of winter against my skin was clarifying, pulling me back to reality.

The resort's exterior lights illuminated the snow-covered grounds, casting long shadows across the pristine white. I wrapped my arms around myself, watching my breath form clouds in the frigid air as I walked aimlessly along a shoveled path.

Brooke's smirk flashed in my mind again—that knowing look when she'd caught me staring, the confidence in her voice when she'd said, *"Listen, I'm not judging you. I'd stare at me too."*

A fresh wave of heat washed over me despite the cold, remembering how close we'd stood in that moment, barely a breath apart. How I could smell the faint scent of her shampoo, something clean and subtle, nothing like the expensive perfumes my friends and I wore. How her eyes had held

mine, dark and questioning, as if trying to read the confusion written across my face.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about it? Why couldn't I—

"Madeline?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of my name. Turning, I found Victoria standing a few feet away, a puzzled expression on her face. Sophie and Audrey were just behind her, all three bundled in their designer ski jackets.

"What are you doing out here without a coat?" Victoria asked, looking me up and down with obvious concern. "You'll freeze to death."

I forced a casual smile, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. "Just needed some air. What are you guys doing?"

"Heading back from the bar," Sophie explained, her dark hair dusted with snowflakes. "They had this amazing hot chocolate with peppermint schnapps." She grinned mischievously. "The schnapps part wasn't exactly on the menu, but Julian convinced the bartender."

At the mention of my brother, I stiffened slightly. "Julian's with you?"

"He was," Audrey replied, adjusting her pink beanie. "He and Sam went back to their room like ten minutes ago. Julian's jaw was bothering him."

"His jaw?" I repeated, then remembered with a jolt—Brooke had punched him. In my emotional whirlwind, I'd almost forgotten the incident that had started this strange evening.

Victoria rolled her eyes dramatically. "Yeah, your psycho roommate really got him good. He's going to have a nasty bruise."

"She's not psycho," I said automatically, the words out before I could stop them.

Three pairs of eyes fixed on me with varying degrees of surprise.

"She punched your brother in the face," Victoria said slowly, as if I might have forgotten this crucial detail. "Unprovoked."

"It wasn't unprovoked," I countered, feeling a strange defensiveness rise inside me. "Julian was being... Julian. You know how he gets."

"Still," Audrey chimed in, "who just hauls off and hits someone like that? She must have some serious anger issues."

"Or she's just a badass," Sophie said with a small laugh. "I mean, I'm not saying it's right to hit people, but you have to admit it took guts. Julian's like twice her size, and she didn't even hesitate." She looked at me with

undisguised curiosity. "What's she like as a roommate? Is she always that intense?"

I thought about Brooke—quiet Brooke reading her book by the window, determined Brooke carving down the mountain, vulnerable Brooke talking about her mother, confident Brooke standing half-dressed in our room.

"She's... complicated," I said finally.

Victoria linked her arm through mine, the warmth of her jacket a welcome barrier against the cold. "Well, come inside before you turn into an icicle. You can tell us all about your complicated roommate situation somewhere we're not freezing to death."

I let them lead me back into the resort, grateful for the distraction from my churning thoughts. We made our way to the lounge area near the main fireplace, which was nearly deserted at this late hour. Just a few guests lingering over nightcaps, soft music playing in the background, the fire crackling in the massive stone hearth.

We settled into a cluster of plush armchairs, the heat from the fire slowly seeping into my chilled limbs. My friends fell into easy conversation, dissecting the day's events, who said what to whom, who was seen with who. The normal rhythms of our friendship, the backdrop to my life for as long as I could remember.

"Julian was so embarrassed," Audrey was saying, barely containing her amusement. "A girl half his size, decking him in front of everyone! Did you see his face?"

"To be fair, she caught him completely off guard," Victoria added.

My mind flashed again to Brooke's toned physique, and I felt heat rise to my cheeks. I hoped they'd attribute it to the fire.

"Why did she hit him anyway?" Sophie asked, turning to me. "Do you know?"

I hesitated. The truth was complicated—Brooke had hit Julian because he'd mocked her dead mother, because he'd been cruel in a way that crossed every line. But saying that would mean explaining about Brooke's mother, about my growing understanding of Brooke's isolation, about things that felt private somehow, sacred even. Things shared between us in moments of rare honesty.

"Julian said something he shouldn't have," I said finally, keeping it vague. "He deserved it, trust me."

The conversation moved on, but my thoughts remained tangled, a knot I couldn't unravel. I kept seeing Brooke's face when I'd walked back into our room—the surprise, then that flash of confidence, challenging me with those dark eyes that seemed to see too much.

"Okay, earth to Madeline," Victoria said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You've been weird all night. What's going on with you?"

I blinked, pulled back to the present moment. All three were staring at me with varying degrees of concern and curiosity. I opened my mouth to brush it off, but what came out instead surprised even me.

"Okay, just wondering. If you were... I don't know, confused about your feelings for someone, like, someone you didn't expect to ever feel anything for—what would that mean?"

The words hung in the air for a moment, before Victoria's eyes widened with delight. "Wait. Oh my god—are you into another guy?"

I froze, caught in the trap of my own making. Another guy. Of course that's where their minds would go. Where else would they go?

I paused, my heart hammering in my throat. Then I forced a little smirk and said, "Sure. Something like that."

Part of me wanted to laugh at the absurdity. If they only knew it wasn't another guy at all—it was a girl. What would they say then? Victoria would probably recoil in horror. Audrey would stare at me like I'd grown a second head. Even Sophie, the kindest of the three, would be shocked. My careful social standing, built over years, could collapse in seconds.

That seemed to be all the confirmation they needed. Sophie squealed, leaning forward eagerly. "Who is it? Someone from school? Someone here at the resort?"

"A ski instructor?" Audrey suggested, eyebrows waggling suggestively. "That tall one with the man bun was totally checking you out."

I let their theories wash over me, nodding or shaking my head noncommittally, offering neither confirmation nor denial. But inside, those words kept echoing: *Something like that. Something like that.*

Because it wasn't a guy. It wasn't anyone they'd guess. It was Brooke—complicated, frustrating, captivating Brooke who somehow managed to make me feel more like myself in her presence than I did with anyone else.

The realization settled over me like fresh snow, silent and transformative. I didn't have words for what I was feeling, didn't have a category to file it under. All I knew was that when Brooke looked at me—

really looked at me—I felt seen. Not the version of me that existed in everyone else's eyes, but something deeper, truer. Something I was only just beginning to recognize myself.

"I'm pretty tired," I said suddenly, standing up. "I think I'm going to head to bed."

There were protests, of course, demands for more details, but I waved them off with practiced ease. "Another time. It's probably nothing anyway."

But it wasn't nothing. That was the problem.

I made my way through the quieting resort, avoiding the main corridors where I might run into anyone else. I found a secluded stairwell and sat on the bottom step, wrapping my arms around my knees like I used to do as a child when I needed to feel safe.

What was happening to me? I'd spent my entire life knowing exactly who I was, exactly where I fit. Madeline Hayes: popular, perfect, enviable. I dated the right boy, befriended the right girls, wore the right clothes, said the right things. I'd constructed my identity so carefully, each piece selected and placed with precision.

And now, in the space of a few days, it all felt like it was crumbling. Because of her. Because of the way she challenged me, the way she refused to be impressed by the version of myself I presented to the world. Because of the way she looked at me tonight—not with reverence or envy or disdain, but with something that looked uncomfortably like understanding.

The fact that she was a girl made it all the more confusing, all the more frightening. I'd never looked at a girl the way I'd looked at Brooke tonight. Never felt my breath catch at the sight of another girl's body, never found myself wondering what it would be like to trace my fingers along another girl's skin. These thoughts weren't supposed to be part of who I was, weren't included in the careful blueprint of Madeline Hayes' perfect life.

I wondered if she'd noticed how I'd looked at her. If she'd seen the confusion, the fascination, the way my eyes had lingered on the curves of her muscles. If she'd felt the same electric current that had passed between us when we stood so close, breath mingling in the small space between our bodies.

What if it had been someone else in that room with her? The thought rose unbidden, leaving an acrid taste in my mouth. What if it had been Sam, or Julian, or one of the other guys from school? Would she have looked at

them with that same confident smirk, issued the same challenge with those dark eyes?

The idea made my stomach clench with something that felt uncomfortably like jealousy. Which was absurd. I had no claim on Brooke, no right to feel possessive about who saw her or how she looked at them.

So why did it bother me so much?

I sat in that stairwell for what felt like hours, my thoughts chasing each other in endless circles. Eventually, the fatigue of the day caught up with me, a bone-deep weariness that made my limbs feel heavy and my mind sluggish.

It was late when I finally made my way back to our room. I stood outside the door for a long moment, key in hand, gathering my courage like armor. Whatever had happened earlier, whatever I was feeling, I needed to push it down, lock it away where it couldn't cause any more confusion.

I slipped into the room as quietly as possible. The lights were off, but the soft glow from outside illuminated enough for me to see that Brooke was already in bed, her back to the door, blankets pulled up to her shoulders. Her breathing seemed too measured, too careful to be genuine sleep, but I was grateful for the pretense.

I changed quickly in the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face as if it might wash away the tumult of my thoughts. When I emerged, Brooke hadn't moved, her form still and silent in the darkness.

I climbed into my own bed, settling under the covers and staring up at the ceiling. My phone lay next to me on the nightstand, probably full of texts from Sam that I should answer. But I couldn't bring myself to reach for it, couldn't summon the energy to pretend everything was normal when it felt like my entire world had shifted on its axis.

Instead, I lay awake in the darkness, listening to the soft sound of Brooke's breathing across the room, feeling the ghost of that strange connection that had passed between us earlier. My mind kept returning to her—to her unexpected smile, her challenging eyes, the confidence in her stance as she stood before me, unapologetically herself.

In the quiet darkness of our shared room, with nothing but the sound of our breathing and the distant hum of the resort's heating system, I admitted to myself what I'd been running from all night: I couldn't stop thinking about Brooke Winters.

And I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BROOKE

Morning light filtered through a gap in the curtains, drawing a sharp line across my face that finally pulled me from a fitful sleep. I blinked, disoriented, my body heavy with the kind of exhaustion that comes from a night spent more in thought than in dreams. The events of the previous evening clung to me like a shadow I couldn't shake—Madeline's hasty exit, her return, the moment frozen in time when her eyes had traveled over my skin with an intensity that still burned in my memory.

I rolled over, half-expecting to find her bed empty. But there she was, a tangle of blonde hair against the pillow, her breathing deep and even in the quiet room. She'd come back. Sometime in the night, she'd returned, slipping in while I was asleep.

The space between our beds might as well have been an ocean.

Nothing happened last night, but it felt like everything changed. At least to me. She still left. Even after that moment—her standing way too close, the air between us charged with something I couldn't name. Even after staring at me like that. I told her during one of our tutoring sessions that I went to the gym and she didn't believe me. *I bet she believed me last night.*

I dressed quickly in the bathroom, methodically preparing for another day on the mountain. Brush teeth. Wash face. Hair up in a messy bun. Base layers, then snow pants, a thermal shirt, and my favorite hoodie. The ritual was comforting in its familiarity, a stark contrast to the unfamiliar territory I'd found myself in with Madeline.

When I emerged, she hadn't moved, her form still and peaceful beneath the covers. I allowed myself one brief moment to look at her—really look at her. The golden hair splayed across the pillow, the soft curve of her cheek, the slight parting of her lips. Something twisted in my chest, an ache I didn't want to name.

"It doesn't matter," I whispered to myself, so quietly the words barely existed. "None of this matters."

I gathered my gear and slipped out the door, closing it with barely a click behind me. The hallway stretched empty before me, the resort still quiet in these early hours. Perfect. Solitude was what I needed—what I'd always needed. What made today any different?

The dining hall was nearly deserted, just a few early risers nursing coffee and planning their day. I loaded my plate with eggs and toast, fuel for the slopes, and settled at an empty table by the window. Outside, the mountain waited, pristine and patient, offering the escape I desperately craved.

I ate mechanically, barely tasting the food, my mind replaying last night's scene in endless variation. The look in Madeline's eyes when she'd walked in on me—surprise, yes, but something else too. Something that had made my skin feel too tight, my heart beating a strange rhythm against my ribs.

And then she'd left. Again. Run back to Sam, perfect, golden Sam with his easy smile and unwavering devotion. The thought of them together sent another twist through my chest, sharper this time, edged with something that felt dangerously like jealousy.

"You're being ridiculous," I muttered, stabbing at my eggs with unnecessary force. "She's Madeline Hayes. She has a boyfriend. She has friends. People like her don't—"

Don't what? Spend time with people like me? Care about people like me? Choose people like me?

The truth hung in the air, unspoken but undeniable: people always leave. People after Mom died, gradually drifting away when my grief became too heavy a burden. My father, physically present but emotionally adrift in his own sorrow. Even teachers, who'd once praised my intelligence, now treated me with the careful distance reserved for fragile things.

"I'm not looking for her," I insisted to myself as I scanned the dining hall for what must have been the tenth time. "I'm just... observing."

But she wasn't there. Of course she wasn't. She was probably still asleep, or maybe with Sam, or with her friends—anywhere but here with me. The thought shouldn't have bothered me. It shouldn't have felt like a stone settling in the pit of my stomach.

I finished breakfast and headed for the slopes, strapping on my board with practiced efficiency. The mountain beckoned, offering its reliable comfort—the rush of wind, the bite of cold air, the perfect communion of body and board and snow. Here, at least, I knew exactly who I was.

The first run was cleansing, the second exhilarating. By the third, I'd found my rhythm, carving clean lines through fresh powder, my body remembering its purpose. But even as I flew down the mountain, a part of my mind remained tethered to the resort, to room 217, to the girl who'd looked at me like I was something she'd never seen before.

I found myself scanning the slopes, the lift lines, searching for a glimpse of blonde hair, a flash of that distinctive designer jacket. Not intentionally—it was more like a reflex, an involuntary response my body had developed without my permission.

"I wasn't looking for her," I told the empty chairlift beside me. "I just... noticed she wasn't there."

The mountain didn't answer, indifferent to my small human concerns.

By midday, my legs were burning pleasantly with exertion, but my mind was still caught in its relentless cycle. Where was she? With Sam, obviously. That's who she was comfortable with. That's who she trusted. That's who she chose.

"Why wouldn't she choose him over me?" The words slipped out, barely audible over the whoosh of snow beneath my board.

A memory surfaced: standing alone in the school hallway after Mom's funeral, watching as people whispered and averted their eyes, unsure how to approach the girl whose mother had died. The acute sense of being suddenly, irreversibly different.

I'd learned then what I was relearning now: people leave. They always leave. Opening yourself up only creates more opportunities for abandonment.

"I should've known better," I muttered, anger rising like a tide, hot and clarifying. "I always do this—I let myself believe someone might stay, and they never do."

The anger felt good, familiar. Better than the hollow ache that had taken up residence beneath my ribs. Better than acknowledging the truth: that I'd allowed myself to hope for something impossible. That for a brief, irrational moment, I'd believed Madeline Hayes might actually see me—might choose to see me—when no one else had bothered to look in years.

By early afternoon, the anger had calcified into something hard and protective, a shell I could hide behind. I was furious with Madeline for making me care, for showing me glimpses of someone worth knowing

before retreating back to her perfect life. But mostly, I was furious with myself for falling for it, for believing anything could be different.

Needing space, needing air that didn't feel heavy with disappointment, I veered off toward a quiet bench near the lower lift—a forgotten corner where the general crowd rarely ventured. I unclipped my board, dropped my helmet beside me, and simply breathed, letting the cold air fill my lungs until it hurt.

The mountains stretched before me, vast and indifferent to human drama. I'd always found comfort in their stoic presence, their reminder that my problems were insignificant against their ancient timeline. Today, though, even they couldn't quiet the storm inside me.

"Hey," a voice broke through my reverie. "You're seriously good."

I looked up, startled. A boy stood a few feet away, snowboard tucked under one arm, curly dark hair escaping from beneath a gray beanie. His goggles rested on his forehead, revealing eyes the color of amber. I recognized him vaguely—maybe from the cafeteria or a shared class—but we'd never spoken.

"What?" I asked, the word coming out more abruptly than I'd intended.

If he noticed my tone, he didn't show it. "I saw you earlier, on the black diamond, right? That run's brutal. You carved through it like it was nothing."

I shrugged, brushing snow off my gloves in a gesture meant to appear casual. "Been riding since I was ten."

He grinned, shifting his snowboard to one hand. "Well, it shows." There was a pause, a brief assessment. "I'm Luca, by the way."

I hesitated, weighing the effort of social interaction against the desperate need to be anywhere but inside my own head. Finally, I pulled off a glove and shook his offered hand. "...Brooke."

"Cool to meet you." His grin deepened, taking on a teasing quality that wasn't entirely unwelcome. "My group ditched me for hot chocolate and selfies. Not mad about it, though—I got to end up here with you."

I stared at him, momentarily at a loss. Was he flirting with me? The realization was so unexpected I almost laughed. When was the last time someone had bothered to flirt with me? When was the last time I'd even noticed if they had?

He nodded toward the slope. "You racing later?"

"What race?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "You didn't hear? There's a student race after lunch. Nothing official, just for fun. You should totally enter."

I shook my head instinctively, the thought of crowds and attention making my skin crawl. "I don't do crowds."

Luca shrugged, an easy acceptance that somehow didn't feel dismissive. "Fair. But you'd probably smoke everyone out there." Another pause, his eyes meeting mine with unexpected directness. "Just saying... it'd be kinda fun to watch you win."

I didn't respond immediately. Part of me wanted to shut this down, to retreat back into the safe solitude I'd cultivated so carefully. But another part—a part I barely recognized—was tired of hiding, tired of being forgotten.

"Maybe," I heard myself say, the word hanging between us like a tentative bridge.

His smile widened, genuine and warm. "Yeah?"

I allowed myself a small smile in return, surprised by how natural it felt. "Don't get too excited. I said maybe."

"I'll take it," he replied, settling onto the bench beside me, leaving just enough space that it didn't feel intrusive.

The conversation flowed with unexpected ease, touching on snowboarding techniques, music preferences, the best places to ride. Luca was funny in an understated way, his humor dry and self-deprecating. He didn't push when I gave short answers, didn't seem bothered by my guardedness. It was... nice. Simple. Uncomplicated.

Everything that was happening with Madeline wasn't.

"So," he said eventually, checking his watch. "Race starts in thirty. Still a maybe?"

I looked out at the mountain, then back at him, at his easy smile and uncomplicated interest. Suddenly, the idea of racing—of doing something purely for myself, something that had nothing to do with Madeline Hayes or complicated feelings or the ache in my chest—seemed incredibly appealing.

"You know what?" I stood, reaching for my helmet. "I think I will."

His expression brightened. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I strapped my board back on with newfound determination. "Might as well show everyone how it's done."

The starting area for the impromptu race was crowded with students, a mixture of skilled riders and novices all jostling for position. I hung back, observing the chaos with detached amusement. There was no official organization, just a general understanding that when the lift operator blew his whistle, everyone would charge down the designated run, racing for bragging rights and fleeting glory.

I spotted Julian among the competitors. But no Madeline. The realization brought a mixture of relief and disappointment that I immediately tried to squash.

"Thought you might bail," Luca said, appearing beside me with that same easy smile.

"Still might," I replied, but there was no real intention behind the words.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Nah. Something tells me you're not the type to back down from a challenge."

The assessment was surprisingly accurate, hitting closer to home than I wanted to admit. I adjusted my goggles, hiding whatever might have shown in my eyes. "We'll see."

As the starting time approached, more spectators gathered at the bottom of the run, small figures in the distance that would witness whatever happened next. I positioned myself toward the edge of the group, away from Julian, focusing on the path ahead rather than the people around me.

The lift operator's whistle cut through the crisp air, sharp and clear.

And then we were off, a wave of riders surging forward, boards cutting through snow with varying degrees of skill. I held back for just a moment, letting the initial chaos sort itself out before carving my own path through the powder.

The world narrowed to just this: the bite of cold air against what little skin was exposed, the burn in my legs as I pushed myself harder, the perfect harmony of body and board working as one. I wove through other riders with practiced precision, finding the fastest line down the mountain as if by instinct.

This was freedom. This was clarity. This was where I belonged.

I hit a section of fresh powder, using it to gain speed rather than slow down, feeling the exhilaration of perfectly executed turns. The finish line approached, marked by two ski poles stuck in the snow with a bandana strung between them.

As I crossed it, I heard cheers from the small crowd that had gathered to watch. I carved to a stop in a spray of snow, heart pounding with exertion and something that felt dangerously close to joy.

Luca was among the first to reach me, his face split with a grin. "Told you! Absolutely smoked everyone." He held up a hand for a high five, which I returned before I could overthink it.

Other riders finished behind me, some wiping out spectacularly, others making respectable showings. Julian crossed with a decent time, immediately surrounded by friends congratulating him as if he'd won. I rolled my eyes, unsurprised by his ability to make everything about himself.

And then I saw her.

Madeline stood at the edge of the crowd, her designer jacket unmistakable against the white snow. She was clapping, a smile lighting up her face as she cheered. For me. She was cheering for me.

Our eyes met across the distance, and for a moment, everything else fell away—the crowd, the noise, even Luca standing beside me. There was just Madeline, looking at me with something like pride, something like admiration, something like—

I turned away.

The anger I'd been nurturing all day flared hot and bright. How dare she? How dare she disappear all morning, run back to Sam and her perfect friends, and then show up now, acting like she cared? Acting like she had any right to celebrate my victory?

"You okay?" Luca asked, noticing the sudden shift in my demeanor.

"Fine," I replied, the word clipped. "Just ready to go."

I unclipped my board with more force than necessary, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but here, anywhere Madeline Hayes wasn't looking at me with those blue eyes that somehow saw too much and not enough all at once.

People always leave. They always choose someone else. Opening yourself up only creates more opportunities for abandonment. The lessons I'd learned the hard way echoed in my mind, hardening my resolve.

Whatever had flickered between Madeline and me—whatever strange, unnamed connection had formed in the quiet moments of honesty we'd shared—it wasn't real. It couldn't be. Girls like Madeline Hayes didn't choose girls like me. They never had, and they never would.

Better to end it now, before she had the chance to walk away first. Better to be the one who leaves than the one left behind. Again.

The decision settled over me like armor, protective and cold. I wouldn't give her the power to hurt me. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I tucked my board under my arm and walked away from the finish line. This time, I would be the one to disappear.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MADELINE

Light streamed through the curtains, painting golden stripes across the empty bed beside mine. Brooke was gone—again. I stared at the perfectly made covers, the abandoned space where she should have been, and felt a hollow ache spread through my chest. It was becoming a pattern—waking to find her already gone, as if she couldn't bear to spend even those first waking moments in my presence.

Not that I could blame her. Not after last night.

I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to block out the memory that refused to fade: Brooke standing there in the soft light, curves and angles of her body on display, that knowing smile playing on her lips when she caught me staring. The electricity in that moment had been undeniable, crackling between us like static before a storm.

And I had run. Like I always did when something threatened the careful construction of who I thought I was supposed to be.

"You're a coward, Madeline Hayes," I whispered to the empty room.

I dragged myself out of bed, movements heavy with the weight of confusion. The bathroom mirror reflected a stranger—same blonde hair, same blue eyes, but behind them lurked questions I had no answers for. Who was this girl who couldn't stop thinking about her roommate? Who felt more like herself in the company of someone she was supposed to hate than with the friends she'd cultivated her entire life?

Who am I when I'm not being who everyone expects me to be?

The question haunted me as I dressed, as I brushed my teeth, as I applied just enough makeup to maintain the illusion of Madeline Hayes, Queen Bee. The perfect girlfriend. The perfect daughter. The perfect everything to everyone except myself.

My phone buzzed with incoming texts—Victoria coordinating our morning meet-up, Sam checking in, Julian complaining about his bruised

jaw. The usual voices that dictated the rhythm of my days. Today, they felt like noise drowning out something essential I was struggling to hear.

I needed space. Distance from Brooke, distance from these feelings I couldn't name. Maybe if I surrounded myself with the familiar—Sam's steady presence, Victoria's confident certainty, the well-worn paths of my established life—I could find my way back to solid ground.

I texted back quickly: *Be there in 15. Lifts at 9?*

As I headed out, I cast one last glance at Brooke's empty bed, fighting the irrational disappointment that she hadn't left a note, a sign, anything to acknowledge what had passed between us. The door clicked shut behind me with a finality that felt oddly like loss.

"So you're actually sticking with the snowboarding thing?" Julian asked, eyebrows raised as we stood in the lift line. "I thought that was just a one-time humiliation."

I adjusted my stance, the board feeling both foreign and familiar beneath my foot. "I like it," I said simply, offering no further explanation.

The truth was more complicated. Snowboarding connected me to Brooke in a way I wasn't ready to examine too closely—her patient instruction, her genuine smile when I linked my first successful turns, the freedom I'd glimpsed through her eyes. But it was also something I'd discovered for myself, something that existed outside the narrow confines of who Madeline Hayes was supposed to be.

Sam squeezed my hand, his smile warm with pride. "You're picking it up really quick. Natural talent."

"Or she had a good teacher," Victoria said with a pointed look, the edge in her voice unmistakable. She hadn't missed the time I'd spent with Brooke. Victoria never really missed anything.

I shrugged, aiming for casual indifference. "Beginner's luck."

The lift carried us up the mountain, the resort shrinking below as we ascended into clearer air. Sam's arm draped around my shoulders, a familiar weight that should have been comforting. Instead, I found myself wondering what it would feel like to ride the lift with Brooke again, to revisit that strange, charged conversation we'd shared.

Stop it, I told myself firmly. *This isn't helping anything.*

We spent the morning on the easier runs, my friends skiing while I cautiously snowboarded, testing the limits of my newfound skills. I fell more than once, earned Julian's relentless teasing, but there was a

satisfaction in the effort, in the moments when everything clicked and I felt the rush of controlled speed.

Still, my eyes kept scanning the slopes, searching for a familiar figure with graceful turns and perfect form. Not intentionally—my gaze seemed to have developed a will of its own, constantly seeking what I told myself I didn't want to find.

"Looking for someone?" Victoria asked during a water break, her tone deceptively light.

I busied myself adjusting my bindings. "No. Why?"

"Just curious why you keep checking out every brunette that flies past us."

Heat rose to my cheeks, and I was grateful for the cold air that had already painted them pink. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just... observing other riders. Learning techniques."

Victoria's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Right. Techniques."

By early afternoon, a restlessness had settled beneath my skin, an itch I couldn't scratch. Sam suggested lunch at the lodge, and I agreed more out of habit than hunger. As we headed toward the base area, I overheard excited chatter about a student race happening soon.

"We should check it out," Julian said, already veering in that direction. "I bet I could smoke everyone."

Sam laughed, shaking his head. "Not with that hangover, you couldn't."

But Julian was already striding toward the registration area, his competitive nature fired up by the prospect of public victory. The rest of us followed, Victoria and Audrey exchanging eye rolls at Julian's predictable ego.

The course was a blue run, marked by flags and ending at an improvised finish line. A small crowd had gathered to watch—other students from our school, resort guests, a few amused locals. I scanned the participants, telling myself I was just curious, that the leap in my pulse when I spotted her was meaningless.

Brooke stood slightly apart from the other competitors, snowboard tucked under her arm, expression unreadable behind her goggles. She looked different somehow—more confident, more present in her own skin. Or maybe I was just seeing her differently now.

Beside her was a boy I vaguely recognized from school, with curly dark hair and an easy smile.

Is she friends with him? When did that happen?

The irrational surge of jealousy caught me off guard. I had no claim on Brooke, no right to care who she spent time with. I had Sam. I had my friends. I had the life I'd carefully cultivated over years.

So why did seeing her smile at someone else feel like losing something precious?

The race began with little ceremony, just the lift operator's whistle signaling the start. From my vantage point at the finish line, I could see the competitors surge forward, a chaotic mass at first, then spreading out as skill levels became apparent.

Julian was doing reasonably well, his natural athleticism compensating for a lack of technique. But Brooke—Brooke was something else entirely. She carved through the snow with a grace that made it look effortless, finding the fastest line down the mountain as if drawn by invisible forces. Even those who knew nothing about snowboarding could see she was in a different league.

"She's incredible," Sam murmured beside me, genuine admiration in his voice.

"Yeah," I agreed softly, unable to tear my eyes away. "She is."

Brooke crossed the finish line well ahead of the others, carving to a stop in a spray of snow that glittered in the sunlight. Without conscious thought, I found myself clapping, a smile spreading across my face. Pride swelled in my chest—not for anything I had done, but simply for witnessing her excellence, for knowing there was more to Brooke Winters than most people ever bothered to see.

Her curly-haired *friend* reached her first, his face split with a wide grin as he offered a high five. I watched their interaction with that same strange ache, wondering what it would be like to be the one celebrating with her, to share in her moment of triumph.

Then, as if pulled by some invisible thread, Brooke turned. Our eyes met across the crowd, and for a breathtaking moment, everything else fell away. I raised my hand in a small, uncertain wave, the gesture awkward with all the things I couldn't say.

"You were amazing," I called out, the words inadequate but sincere.

Something shifted in her expression, a hardening around the eyes, a tightening of her jaw. And then she turned away, deliberately, unmistakably.

She tucked her board under her arm and began walking, her path taking her directly past me as if I were nothing more than air.

The dismissal was so unexpected, so complete, that for a moment I simply stood frozen, unable to process what was happening. Then instinct took over—the girl who'd never been ignored, never been dismissed, reaching out to grab Brooke's wrist before she could disappear entirely.

"Seriously?" I demanded, hurt transforming instantly to anger. "What's your problem? Why are you being rude all of a sudden?"

Brooke stared at me, her eyes cold and detached. But beneath the surface, I could see something trembling, something raw and wounded that belied her composed exterior.

"I thought you made it very clear we're not friends," she said, each word precise as a blade. "Right?"

My own words, thrown back at me like a slap. I stood there, speechless, the ground seeming to shift beneath my feet. What could I say? She was right. Those had been my words, my defense mechanism, my way of maintaining the distance I thought I needed.

Before I could find my voice, Brooke tugged her wrist from my grasp and walked away, her shoulders straight, her steps unhurried. As if the exchange had meant nothing. As if I had meant nothing.

I remained rooted to the spot, a strange hollowness expanding inside me. Around me, the celebration continued—Julian loudly explaining how he would have won if not for a patch of ice, Victoria and Audrey laughing at something on someone's phone, Sam waiting patiently for my attention to return.

But all I could see was Brooke walking away. All I could feel was the ghost of her wrist slipping from my fingers, taking with it something I hadn't known I wanted to keep.

I avoided going back to our room for as long as possible, making excuses to stay with Sam and the others until my smile felt painted on and my patience had worn tissue-thin. But as dinner time approached, I couldn't delay any longer. I needed to change, needed to at least attempt to look like the Madeline Hayes everyone expected me to be, even as I felt less and less like her with each passing hour.

The door to room 217 loomed before me, a portal to a confrontation I wasn't sure I was ready for. I stood there for a long moment, key in hand, gathering courage like armor around my faltering heart.

This is ridiculous. It's just Brooke. Just my temporary roommate. Just a girl who means nothing to me.

The lies felt hollow even in my own mind.

I unlocked the door, and pushed the door open, bracing myself for whatever awaited me on the other side.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BROOKE

I pushed through the door to our room, my limbs heavy with exhaustion, my mind still buzzing from the race. Victory had tasted sweet for those brief moments at the finish line—the pure, uncomplicated joy of excelling at something I loved. But Madeline had been there, cheering, smiling, looking at me like she was proud, and that had ruined everything. It had pulled me back into the confusing orbit of whatever this was between us, this thing I was trying so desperately to escape.

Her touch still lingered on my wrist, where she'd grabbed me after I'd tried to walk away. Even now, I could feel the ghost of her fingers, the shock of warmth against my cold skin, the way my pulse had jumped beneath her grip. No one touched me like that—with intention, with demand. It had caught me completely off guard.

"I thought you made it very clear we're not friends." The words had left my lips before I could stop them, sharp-edged with hurt I hadn't meant to reveal. And the look on her face—confusion giving way to recognition, then a flash of what might have been guilt—had lodged in my chest like a splinter, painful every time I breathed.

I stripped off my snow gear and headed straight for the shower, cranking the water as hot as I could stand it. Steam filled the small bathroom as I stood under the punishing spray, hoping it might wash away not just the exertion of the day but the lingering sensation of her fingers on my skin, the memory of her eyes following me across the snow.

What did she want from me? One minute she was leaving our room to go to Sam, the next she was looking at me like I was something precious she'd lost. One day she was laughing with me on the slopes, sharing drinks at a bar, looking at me like she could see straight through all my carefully constructed walls. The next she was back with her perfect friends, her perfect boyfriend, her perfect life where I was just a temporary diversion, an interesting footnote.

I shut off the water with more force than necessary, wrapping myself in a towel that felt too rough against my overheated skin. Through the foggy mirror, my reflection was blurred—an apt metaphor for how I felt.

Undefined. Unsettled. Caught between the person I'd always been and someone new, someone who let Madeline Hayes under her skin.

Tonight was the last mandatory dinner of the trip, and since it was the final evening, it had a more formal atmosphere than usual. Typically, I'd wear whatever was comfortable, blend into the background as I always did. But something rebellious stirred within me as I stood before my open suitcase. Maybe it was Madeline's dismissal, maybe it was the lingering high of winning the race, or maybe I was just tired of being invisible.

I pulled out a dark blue blouse with a subtle pattern, one I'd packed on a whim. The silky fabric was cool against my fingers, the cut more form-fitting than my usual baggy clothes, with a V-neck that dipped lower than I typically allowed. It had been a gift from my mom for my thirteenth birthday, just months before her diagnosis. She'd picked it with her usual confidence and style, insisting it would eventually bring out the green in my eyes when I grew into it.

"You're more than just a student, Brooke," she'd said, her smile warm and knowing. "More than just a snowboarder. Don't be afraid to let people see that."

I'd never worn it before. After she died, it had been carefully folded away, too precious and painful to look at. But tonight, I pulled it on, feeling both like I was honoring her memory and stepping into a version of myself she'd always seen more clearly than I had.

But tonight, I pulled it on, along with a pair of black pants that actually fit properly. The girl in the mirror looked different—not just because of the clothes, but because of the determination in her eyes, the slight flush in her cheeks, the tension in her jaw. She looked like someone with a secret, someone who might not always fade into the background.

I finished getting ready quickly, applying minimal makeup and running a brush through my damp hair before settling on my bed with my book. I could feel the unfamiliar fabric of the blouse against my skin, a constant reminder of this small act of rebellion. The words on the page blurred before my eyes, my mind too restless to focus, but the familiar weight of the book in my hands was comforting—a shield against whatever might come next.

Twenty minutes passed before the door opened and Madeline appeared, snowflakes melting in her blonde hair, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She hesitated when she saw me, her eyes widening slightly before she composed her features into careful indifference.

"Hi," she said, the word dropping into the silence between us like a stone into still water.

I nodded, the barest acknowledgment, keeping my eyes on my book though I couldn't have said what words they were seeing. I was acutely aware of her moving around the room, the soft sounds of her unpacking things, hanging up her jacket. The mundane sounds of a shared existence that somehow felt charged with unspoken things.

"Congratulations on the race," she tried again, her voice a careful mix of casual and friendly. "You were really impressive out there."

"Thanks," I replied, not looking up. One word, delivered with the precise amount of polite disinterest I'd perfected over years of keeping people at a distance.

The silence returned, heavier now. I could hear her moving around the room, gathering clothes for her shower. The bathroom door closed behind her with a soft click, and I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, letting my book fall closed.

What was I doing? This cold war between us was exhausting, draining energy I didn't have to spare. And for what? To protect myself from the inevitable moment when Madeline Hayes realized I wasn't worth her time? When she returned fully to her perfect boyfriend, her perfect friends, her perfect life where girls like me didn't belong?

Better to end it now. Better to be the one who walked away than the one left behind. Again.

I returned to my book, forcing myself to focus on the familiar story, letting it carry me away from the complications of the present. The sound of the shower running, the faint smell of Madeline's expensive shampoo seeping under the door, the knowledge that she was so close yet so untouchable—I pushed it all away, retreating into the fictional world between the pages.

When the bathroom door opened twenty minutes later, releasing a cloud of steam and the stronger scent of Madeline's shampoo, I kept my eyes fixed firmly on my book. But I was aware of her presence like a physical

touch against my skin—the rustle of fabric as she moved around the room, the soft padding of her bare feet on the carpet, the subtle warmth that seemed to radiate from her.

I could sense her getting ready for dinner, though I refused to look directly at her. Just brief glimpses from the corner of my eye—the flash of bare shoulders before she slipped on her dress, the shine of her damp hair as she combed it out, the graceful movements of her hands as she applied makeup at the small vanity.

Eventually, she stood before the mirror, dressed in a simple but elegant black dress that highlighted the curves of her body in ways that made my mouth go dry despite myself. Her blonde hair fell loose around her shoulders, catching the light with every movement. She looked effortlessly beautiful, breathtaking beyond reason, ethereal like a dream I was never meant to wake from. And I hated myself for noticing. I hated myself for caring. I hated myself for wanting.

She fumbled with a necklace, a delicate gold chain with a small pendant. I watched covertly as she tried unsuccessfully to clasp it behind her neck, her fingers slipping on the tiny mechanism. A small sigh of frustration escaped her, the sound somehow vulnerable in the quiet room.

Then her eyes found mine in the mirror's reflection, catching me watching. I quickly looked back down at my book, but it was too late. The moment stretched, taut with unspoken things.

"Can you help me with this?" she asked, her voice carefully neutral as she held up the necklace without turning around.

I didn't respond immediately, weighing the request against the walls I'd been so carefully constructing. It would be easy to refuse, to maintain the distance I'd imposed between us. But something pulled me forward, step by reluctant step, until I stood directly behind her.

Madeline gathered her hair and lifted it off her neck, exposing the vulnerable curve where it met her shoulder. I took the necklace from her hand, our fingers brushing in a contact that sent electricity racing up my arm. My heart hammered against my ribs, loud enough that I was certain she must hear it.

The clasp was indeed small, requiring a delicacy of touch that made my hands feel suddenly clumsy. I leaned closer, my breath stirring the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. I could smell her perfume, stronger now,

intoxicating in its proximity. Something floral and expensive that reminded me of sunlight through leaves.

As I worked the clasp, my fingertips brushed against her skin—soft, warm, impossibly smooth. I felt her stiffen slightly, a barely perceptible reaction that mirrored the sudden tightness in my own chest. The gold of the necklace caught the light, warm against her skin, the contrast drawing my eye, making me acutely aware of how close we stood, how intimate this simple act had become.

Time seemed to slow, stretching the moment into an eternity. In the mirror, our eyes met, reflecting something raw and unguarded that made my heart stumble in its rhythm. We were so close that I could feel the warmth radiating from her body, could see the rapid pulse at the base of her throat, could count every one of her eyelashes if I wanted to.

With a click that seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet room, the clasp fastened. But I didn't step away immediately, caught in the gravity of whatever was happening between us. For a breathless moment, we simply stood there, connected by something invisible but undeniable.

Her eyes held mine in the reflection, a question in their depths that I wasn't sure how to answer. The blue of her irises seemed deeper somehow, darkened by something that made my skin feel too tight, my breath too shallow. I watched as her lips parted slightly, as if she might speak, might finally give voice to the tension that had been building between us since that first night she'd walked in on me changing.

Then reality reasserted itself. I stepped back, breaking the spell, putting necessary distance between us. The mirror reflected two girls, standing apart but somehow still connected, both pretending not to feel what pulsed in the air between them.

"Thanks," Madeline said softly, her eyes still holding mine in the reflection. "For doing that. Even though you apparently hate me now."

The accusation stung, not because it was cruel but because it was so far from the truth. I shook my head slightly, my voice low but clear. "I don't hate you."

She turned around then, facing me directly, her eyes searching mine. "I just don't know what you want from me, Madeline."

The question caught her off guard—I could see it in the momentary widening of her eyes, the slight parting of her lips. She looked vulnerable suddenly, stripped of her usual confidence. But instead of softening, she

straightened, her walls slamming back into place with an almost audible click.

"Nothing," she said, her voice brittle. "I don't want anything from you."

But her voice broke slightly on the last word, betraying her. We both heard it—that crack in her perfect façade, that glimpse of something real beneath the surface. For a second, she looked almost panicked, as if she'd given away something precious and couldn't take it back.

I held her gaze for a moment longer than was comfortable, searching for something I couldn't name. Then, without another word, I turned and walked to the door.

My chest felt tight, my hands trembling with the effort of restraint. I wanted to turn back, to shake her, to demand honesty instead of these half-truths and evasions. To ask why she'd looked at me like that if she truly wanted nothing.

Instead, I pulled the door open and stepped through, letting it close behind me with a quiet finality.

In the hallway, I leaned against the wall for a moment, eyes closed, breath coming too quick. The lingering warmth of her skin against my fingertips felt like a brand, a reminder of something I couldn't have. The scent of her perfume clung to me, an invisible thread still connecting us despite the distance I was trying so desperately to maintain.

"Fine," I whispered to the empty corridor. "You don't want anything from me? You won't get anything."

I straightened, smoothing my hands down the front of my blue blouse, adjusting the neckline with a confidence I didn't entirely feel. I could do this. I could walk into that dining hall alone, could sit through dinner pretending I was fine, could maintain the walls I'd spent years perfecting.

The dining hall was already filling with students and faculty when I arrived, the noise level rising with each new group that entered. For the last mandatory dinner of the trip, they'd made an effort to create a more formal atmosphere. Tables were arranged differently than usual, with white cloths and centerpieces of pine and winter berries. Soft music played from hidden speakers, lending the space an air of celebration for our final night.

I found an empty table in the corner, as far from the main entrance as possible, and sat down. My hands still trembled slightly, an aftereffect of whatever had passed between Madeline and me in front of that mirror. I

curled them around the water glass at my place setting, the cool surface anchoring me to the present.

The room continued to fill, students arriving in groups, laughing and talking with the easy confidence of people who knew exactly where they belonged. I kept my eyes on my water glass, not wanting to see when Madeline entered with her friends, with Sam. Not wanting to watch as they claimed their rightful place at the center of everything.

"Mind if I sit here?"

I looked up, surprised to find Luca standing beside my table, a hesitant smile on his face. He gestured to the empty chairs surrounding me.

"Everywhere else is filling up."

I glanced around the room, noticing for the first time how crowded it had become. Most tables were indeed occupied, though there were still scattered empty seats. Luca could easily have joined another group. The fact that he'd chosen my solitary table was a deliberate choice, not a necessity.

"Go ahead," I said after a moment, nodding to the chair across from me.

His smile widened as he sat down, dropping his napkin into his lap with casual ease. "Thanks. Not really in the mood for a crowd tonight, you know?"

I did know, better than he could imagine. But I just nodded, taking a sip of my water.

"That was seriously impressive today," he continued, seemingly undeterred by my lack of verbal response. "The race. You made it look effortless."

"Thanks," I said, setting my glass down carefully. "Been doing it a long time."

"It shows." He leaned forward slightly, his expression friendly but not pushy. "Been snowboarding since I was twelve, and I've never managed to make it look that smooth."

The conversation flowed more easily than I would have expected, touching on snowboarding techniques, favorite mountains, the best conditions for different types of riding. Luca was knowledgeable without being condescending, enthusiastic without overwhelming. It was... nice. Simple. Uncomplicated.

Everything that was happening with Madeline wasn't.

I was just beginning to relax, just starting to enjoy the easy back-and-forth, when I felt it—a prickling awareness at the base of my neck, the

unmistakable sensation of being watched. I didn't need to look up to know who had entered the dining hall. My body seemed attuned to Madeline's presence, recognizing it on some primal level before my conscious mind could catch up.

When I finally did glance toward the entrance, there she was—standing with her usual group, her black dress making her blonde hair seem even brighter in the warm lighting of the room. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders, softening her features in a way that made her look younger, more approachable. Sam stood beside her, his hand resting lightly at the small of her back, his head bent as he listened to something Julian was saying.

For a brief moment, her eyes met mine across the crowded room. Something flashed in her gaze—surprise, perhaps, at seeing me engaged in conversation with Luca. Then her expression smoothed, returning to the practiced indifference she wore so well.

I turned back to Luca, determined not to let Madeline's arrival affect me. "You were saying about Whistler?" I prompted, referring to the conversation we'd been having about ski resorts.

He picked up the thread easily, telling me about a trip he'd taken with his family the previous winter. I nodded in the right places, asked appropriate questions, but part of my awareness remained fixed on Madeline, tracking her progress through the room by the sound of her laugh, the flash of blonde in my peripheral vision.

She and her group settled at a table on the opposite side of the room, far enough away that I couldn't hear their conversation but close enough that I was constantly aware of her presence. It felt like a physical thing, stretching across the space between us, pulling at my attention no matter how I tried to focus on Luca.

"It's nice," Luca said suddenly, breaking into my thoughts. "Talking to someone who doesn't make everything feel like it's about to explode."

I blinked, caught off guard by the observation. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged, a small smile playing around his lips. "Just that you're... straightforward. No games, no drama. It's refreshing."

The irony of his statement wasn't lost on me. If only he knew the storm that had been raging inside me since Madeline had grabbed my wrist after the race. If only he could see how her mere presence across the room was making my skin feel too tight, my breath too shallow. Nothing about me felt straightforward or drama-free in that moment.

But that wasn't his fault. And the fact that he saw me as uncomplicated was actually something of a relief—a reminder that there was still a version of Brooke Winters that existed outside the confusing orbit of Madeline Hayes.

"Thanks," I said, offering him a smile that felt more genuine than any I'd managed all day. "I appreciate that."

As I smiled at Luca, I felt it again—that prickling awareness, stronger now. I glanced up reflexively, my eyes finding Madeline's across the room. She was watching us, her expression unreadable. Our gazes locked for a long moment, something electric passing between us even at this distance.

Then Sam said something to her, drawing her attention back to their table. But not before I'd seen it—the flash of something in her eyes that looked dangerously like jealousy.

She can't stand seeing me happy when she's not the reason for it.

The realization was as startling as it was illuminating. Madeline Hayes, who claimed to want nothing from me, couldn't bear to see me smiling at someone else. The contradiction was so obvious, so human, that it almost made me laugh.

But I didn't. Instead, I turned back to Luca, offering him my full attention, engaging more fully in our conversation than I had all evening. If Madeline was watching, let her watch. Let her see that I could exist, could connect, could smile without her involvement.

Throughout dinner, I felt her eyes on me more than once. Each time, I deliberately didn't look her way, focusing instead on Luca, on my food, on anything but the blonde girl across the room who couldn't seem to decide what she wanted from me.

After dessert had been served and cleared, students began to drift out of the dining hall, heading for the large lounge area with its roaring fireplace and comfortable seating. Luca stood, pushing in his chair.

"Some of us are hanging out by the fire for a bit," he said, nodding toward the exit. "Care to join? No pressure if you'd rather call it a night."

I hesitated. Part of me wanted nothing more than to retreat to the solitude of a quiet corner, to process the emotional whiplash of the day. But another part—the part still smarting from Madeline's dismissal, from her insistence that she wanted nothing from me—was tempted by the prospect of normal social interaction, of conversation that didn't feel like navigating a minefield.

"Sure," I said, standing up and smoothing my hands down the front of my blouse. "For a bit."

The lodge's main lounge was warm and inviting, with its massive stone fireplace and comfortable seating arranged in conversational groupings. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, casting a golden glow over everything. Students had claimed various spots around the room, some playing board games, others just talking and laughing.

Luca led me toward a small group I vaguely recognized from the slopes, introducing me with a casual "This is Brooke, the one who destroyed everyone in the race today." There were smiles, nods of recognition, easy acceptance as they shifted to make room for us in their circle.

The conversation flowed around me, uncomplicated and light. At one point, Luca said something about a spectacular wipeout he'd witnessed earlier that day, his impression of the unfortunate skier so spot-on that I found myself laughing genuinely, the sound surprising even to my own ears.

It felt good—this moment of normalcy, of connection without complication. For a few precious minutes, I wasn't thinking about Madeline, about her fingers on my wrist, about the electricity that had passed between us as I fastened her necklace.

And then, as if summoned by the mere thought of her, Madeline appeared. She and her group entered the lounge, claiming space near the fireplace. Her eyes found me immediately, as if she'd been searching for me, her gaze lingering on Luca beside me before sliding away with practiced indifference.

I didn't look at her again, didn't acknowledge her presence. But I was aware of her the entire time, a persistent hum beneath my skin, a magnetic pull I resisted with every fiber of my being. I laughed a little louder at Luca's jokes, leaned in a bit closer when he spoke, made myself the picture of someone completely unbothered by the presence of Madeline Hayes.

When Luca suggested grabbing drinks from the refreshment table at the back of the lounge, I agreed easily, following him through the crowded room. He told some story about a disastrous ski trip with his cousins, the punchline making me laugh just as we passed near the fireplace, near the spot where Madeline stood with her friends.

I didn't look at her. Not once. Just kept walking, still smiling at Luca's story.

But as we approached the drink table, I sensed movement—Madeline breaking away from her group, making her way in our direction with steps that tried too hard to look casual. My pulse quickened despite my best efforts, my body responding to her proximity in ways my mind couldn't control.

She reached the table just after we did, standing close enough that I could smell her perfume, could feel the warmth radiating from her skin. Luca was occupied with pouring drinks, unaware of the tension crackling in the small space between Madeline and me.

"Making new friends already?" she muttered, her voice low and bitter, meant for my ears alone.

I turned slightly, meeting her eyes for the first time since dinner. Her face was carefully composed, but there was something raw in her gaze, something that belied the casual cruelty of her words.

"You told me you didn't want anything from me," I said quietly, my voice steady despite the storm inside me. I let the words settle between us, each one landing with deliberate weight. "I'm just giving you what you asked for."

Her eyes widened slightly, the blow finding its mark. For a moment, she looked almost vulnerable, stripped of her usual confidence. Then her walls slammed back into place, her expression smoothing into practiced indifference.

But it was too late. I'd seen it—that flash of hurt, of confusion, of something that looked dangerously like longing.

I didn't wait for her response. I turned back to Luca, accepting the cup he offered with a smile that felt more like armor than genuine pleasure. Then I walked away, leaving Madeline standing alone by the drinks table, her composure slipping just enough that anyone looking closely might have seen the truth beneath her perfect façade.

As I rejoined the group by the fireplace, settling into easy conversation about tomorrow's plans for the slopes, I kept a small part of my awareness fixed on Madeline. She remained by the drink table for several long moments, her back straight, her shoulders tense, before finally returning to her friends with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, laughing at something Victoria said, her hand finding Sam's with practiced ease. It was the truth at the heart of all my careful distance, all my walls and deflections. Being nothing was

clean, simple. Being almost something—almost friends, almost more—that was the dangerous territory, the liminal space where hope could grow and inevitably be crushed.

I'd learned the painful lesson that "almost" was worse than "nothing" could ever be.

So that's what I would give Madeline Hayes: nothing. No reaction, no emotion, no vulnerability. A perfect blank where once there might have been... something.

I turned my attention fully to Luca, to the group, to the warmth of the fire and the simple pleasure of conversation without complication. I laughed at the right moments, offered comments when appropriate, allowed myself to exist in this space of normal social interaction.

But part of me—the part that still felt the ghost of Madeline's skin beneath my fingertips, that remembered the look in her eyes when they met mine in the mirror—whispered that it might already be too late. That "nothing" might no longer be possible when it came to Madeline Hayes.

I silenced that voice, buried it beneath layers of practiced indifference, of protective distance. I'd gotten good at pretending over the years, at making my walls look like choices rather than defenses. I could pretend this too—that Madeline's presence across the room didn't affect me, that her words didn't matter, that the electricity between us was nothing more than static, meaningless and forgettable.

I'd rather be nothing to her than almost something.

Even if that meant being nothing to myself as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MADELINE

I 'm just giving you what you asked for."

Brooke's words hit me like a physical blow, each syllable precise and cutting in its quiet delivery. She didn't yell, didn't make a scene. She simply stated a fact and walked away, leaving me frozen by the refreshment table, my untouched cup of punch clenched in my suddenly cold fingers.

The worst part wasn't the words themselves. It was the look in her eyes when she said them—calm, resigned, a door closing. She meant it.

I watched her rejoin Luca and his friends, slipping easily back into their circle as if our exchange had been nothing but a minor interruption. She smiled at something he said, and the sight of it sent a sharp, unfamiliar pain through my chest. That smile wasn't for me. It was for him—for this random curly-haired snowboarder who'd appeared out of nowhere and somehow earned what I couldn't seem to claim no matter how hard I tried.

"Why does it feel like I'm the one being left, when I was the one who said I didn't want anything?" I muttered to my punch, the words bitter on my tongue.

I stood there a moment longer, watching as Brooke leaned in slightly to hear something Luca was saying, her profile illuminated by the firelight. The blue blouse she wore—a departure from her usual shapeless hoodies—caught the golden light, making her look softer somehow, more approachable. When had she started wearing clothes like that? And why did the sight of it make my stomach twist with something that felt dangerously close to longing?

With a deep breath, I composed myself and returned to my friends. The smile I plastered on felt brittle, too tight across my face, but they didn't seem to notice. Victoria was in the middle of a dramatic retelling of some incident from the slopes, her hands gesturing wildly as Julian and Audrey laughed. Sam's arm slipped around my waist as I sat beside him, his touch warm and familiar and somehow not enough.

I laughed at something Victoria said, the sound hollow in my own ears. My hand found Sam's automatically, fingers interlacing with practiced ease. But my awareness remained fixed on Brooke across the room, on the space between us that suddenly felt both too vast and not vast enough.

We were fine. We were more than fine. That night at the bar, we'd talked for hours, sharing stories and laughing like we'd known each other forever. I'd seen a side of her I never knew existed—thoughtful, funny, surprisingly wise. And I'd let her see parts of me I rarely showed anyone else. It had felt... real. Like we were building something, even if I couldn't quite name what that something was.

Then I'd panicked. Run away. Told her I didn't want anything from her.

It was just my default setting. My protective instinct kicking in when things got too real, too close. I hadn't expected her to take it so literally, to shut down completely. I hadn't expected it to hurt this much when she did.

And now Brooke was ignoring me. Sitting with some guy. Laughing. The sight of it burned in a way I couldn't explain, couldn't justify. I had no claim on her, no right to care who she spent time with. I had Sam, my friends, my carefully constructed social life. Brooke Winters was just my temporary roommate, my chemistry tutor, the girl who'd punched my brother.

The girl whose absence suddenly felt like a wound I couldn't stop touching.

"Fine," I whispered to myself, the word lost in the ambient noise of the room. "If she wants space, she can watch what I do with it."

I straightened in my seat, a plan forming with crystal clarity. If Brooke thought she could dismiss me so easily, she was about to learn otherwise. Madeline Hayes didn't get dismissed. Madeline Hayes didn't get left behind.

"Let's go sit with Brooke," I announced abruptly, cutting through whatever conversation had been happening around me.

Victoria's eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. "What? Why?"

Julian snorted. "Yeah, because hanging out with the girl who punched me sounds like a great time."

I shrugged, aiming for casual indifference. "I'm bored. And it's weird sitting over here when they're clearly having more fun." The lie slipped out smoothly, hiding the chaos churning beneath my practiced smile.

Sam gave me a curious look. "Are you sure? I thought things were... tense between you two."

"It's fine," I insisted, already standing. "Come on, don't be boring."

They exchanged glances—skeptical, confused—but ultimately followed as I led our group across the room. I could pinpoint the exact moment Brooke noticed our approach. Her smile faltered, freezing for a half-second before slipping away entirely. The sight should have given me satisfaction—proof that I could affect her, that I wasn't nothing to her—but instead, it just made the knot in my stomach tighten.

"Mind if we join?" I asked with my brightest smile—the one that meant trouble, the one I used when I wanted something and didn't care who I had to step on to get it.

Luca looked surprised but not displeased. "Sure, plenty of room." He scooted closer to Brooke to make space, which only made my smile sharpen.

The others in their group—a few seniors I vaguely recognized from the slopes—shifted to accommodate us. Julian immediately launched into some exaggerated story about his performance in the race, conveniently omitting the part where Brooke had destroyed him. Victoria and Audrey added their usual commentary, while Sam settled beside me, his presence solid and reassuring even as everything else felt like it was sliding out of control.

Brooke didn't look at me directly, but I could feel her awareness of me like a physical touch. Her body had tensed when I sat down, her shoulders drawn slightly inward as if bracing for impact. The space between us—maybe three feet of carpet and awkward silence—felt charged with something volatile, something dangerous.

"We should play a game," Sophie suggested after a particularly uncomfortable lull in conversation. "Something fun, you know, for our last night."

"Truth or dare?" I proposed immediately, the words out before I'd fully considered them. It wasn't for fun. It was for control. A way to force interaction, to break through Brooke's careful indifference, to make her look at me.

There were groans and eye-rolls, but also nods of agreement. It was childish, sure, but we were teenagers on a ski trip. Childish was practically mandatory.

"I'm in," Luca said with an easy grin, looking to Brooke.

She hesitated, something flashing in her eyes—wariness, maybe, or resignation. Then she nodded once, the movement so slight I might have missed it if I hadn't been watching her so intently.

"Great," I said, clapping my hands together. "Who wants to go first?"

The game started innocently enough. Sophie was dared to do a handstand against the wall. Audrey chose truth and admitted to cheating on a history test last semester. Julian dared Luca to attempt a Russian accent for the next three questions, which resulted in everyone dissolving into laughter at his terrible impression.

But beneath the surface pleasantries, tension simmered. Brooke and I continued our careful dance of avoidance—not looking directly at each other, yet hyperaware of every movement, every word. I found myself holding my breath whenever it was her turn, some part of me hoping she would choose me, would acknowledge me in some way, even as another part dreaded what might happen if she did.

"Madeline," Victoria said, her voice laced with mischief. "Truth or dare?"

"Dare," I replied without hesitation. I never chose truth in these games. Too risky, too exposing.

Victoria's smile turned sly. "I dare you to whisper something to Brooke. Something... interesting."

The circle went quiet, the atmosphere suddenly thicker. From the corner of my eye, I saw Brooke go very still, her fingers tightening around her cup.

"Fine," I said, as if it were nothing. As if my heart wasn't suddenly hammering against my ribs.

I shifted closer to Brooke, leaning in until my lips were nearly touching her ear. Her hair smelled like something clean and subtle—nothing like the expensive perfumes my friends and I wore. The scent was uniquely Brooke, and it hit me with unexpected force, momentarily throwing me off balance.

"You look mad," I whispered, my voice lower than intended. "I like it."

I felt rather than saw her sharp intake of breath, the way her body tensed even further. When I pulled back, her eyes were locked straight ahead, her jaw clenched tight enough that I could see the muscle working beneath her skin.

Everyone saw it—that visible reaction. A few awkward laughs circled the group, and Victoria shot me an approving look. I leaned back in my seat

with a practiced smirk, as if I'd won something. But the victory felt hollow, tinged with something that tasted uncomfortably like shame.

The game continued, spinning through our circle like a Russian roulette of adolescent awkwardness. When it came to Luca's turn, he chose truth, and Julian—never one to miss an opportunity for drama—asked him what his biggest turn-off was.

"Dishonesty," Luca replied without hesitation. "Can't stand it when people aren't straight with you."

His eyes didn't flick to me, but I felt the weight of the words nonetheless. They hit too close to a nerve already raw and exposed.

"Brooke," Sophie called, pulling my attention back to the game. "Truth or dare?"

Brooke considered for a moment. "Truth."

Sophie tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Tell us your type. You know, relationship-wise."

The question hung in the air between us, innocent on its surface but loaded with potential. I found myself holding my breath, suddenly desperate to hear her answer even as I dreaded it.

Brooke's eyes finally, finally met mine—direct and unflinching. "Someone honest," she said, her voice quiet but clear. "Someone who knows what they want and isn't afraid to admit it."

The room seemed to go silent, though I knew the others were still talking, still reacting. But all I could hear was the echo of her words, all I could see was the look in her eyes as she delivered them—challenging, hurt, but most devastatingly, disappointed.

"Ouch," Julian laughed, breaking the spell. "Sounds like someone has trust issues."

I managed a cold smile, though I felt like something vital had been severed inside me. Brooke looked away, her expression closing off again, and the moment was gone.

The game continued for another twenty minutes before gradually losing momentum. People began drifting off in small groups, heading back to their rooms for the night. Luca said something to Brooke about meeting up tomorrow for one last run before we all headed home, and I watched as she nodded, a small smile touching her lips.

I ignored the twist in my stomach, turning to Sam with a deliberately bright smile. "Ready to head back? I'm exhausted."

He nodded, but before we could leave, Julian pulled him aside, saying something about borrowing his phone charger. I found myself standing awkwardly alone as our group began to disperse, until suddenly, impossibly, Brooke was beside me—neither of us quite looking at the other, both apparently heading in the same direction.

We fell into step together, walking down the corridor that led to our room. The silence between us was a living thing, heavy with all the words we weren't saying. Our footsteps echoed on the polished floor, the sound strangely intimate in the empty hallway.

"So," I said finally, unable to bear it any longer. "This is your new thing? Getting cozy with snowboard boy?"

I cringed inwardly at how petty it sounded, how transparent. But I couldn't seem to stop myself from pushing, from prodding at the wound between us.

Brooke didn't look at me, her gaze fixed straight ahead. "Didn't know I needed your permission."

"You don't," I shot back, too quickly. "I just didn't peg you as the let's-sit-in-a-circle-and-laugh type."

She finally glanced at me, her expression cool and unreadable in the dim hallway lighting. "Didn't peg you as the jealous type."

The accusation hit like a slap. "I'm not," I insisted, the denial automatic even as something inside me whispered, *Liar*.

Brooke's smile was subtle and sharp, barely a curve of her lips. "If you say so."

I stopped walking for a second, thrown off balance by the quiet certainty in her voice. "What is that supposed to mean?"

She barely slowed, not even looking back at me. "Nothing. Just sounds like you're trying to convince yourself."

Anger flared, hot and bright—not at her, though I pretended it was, but at myself. At how easily she seemed to see through me when I barely understood what was happening in my own heart.

"God, you're annoying," I muttered, catching up to her in quick strides.

"Right back at you," she replied, the evenness of her tone only fueling my frustration.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, but it wasn't calm—it was charged, like static electricity waiting to spark. Every step felt like it was dragging us closer to something neither of us was prepared to name, to face.

We reached our door, and I fumbled with the key, suddenly clumsy with nerves. The lock stuck a little, as if the universe itself was reluctant to let us back in together. When it finally clicked open, we stepped into the warm, dim room and shut the door behind us.

I tossed my coat onto my bed with more force than necessary, the action releasing some of the tension coiled tight in my chest.

"What is your problem?" I demanded, turning to face her fully. "One minute you're nice, the next you're ignoring me, and now you're glued to some random guy like you've known him for years."

Brooke peeled off her jacket slowly, deliberately, her movements controlled in contrast to my building agitation. "We talked for maybe ten minutes," she said, hanging her jacket in the closet with careful precision. "But you've clearly been keeping track."

"Don't flatter yourself," I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest, protective armor against the truth in her words.

"Wasn't trying to."

A beat of silence stretched between us. When Brooke spoke again, her voice was softer—but not kinder. It was the softness of a blade perfectly honed.

"You're the one who said you didn't want anything from me." Her eyes finally met mine, dark and too knowing. "Don't get pissed just because I took your word for it."

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. What could I say? That I hadn't meant it? That I didn't know what I wanted? That every time I thought I had figured out where Brooke Winters fit in my life, the ground shifted beneath me again?

Brooke looked away first, turning toward her bed. "You don't get to want nothing and everything at the same time, Madeline."

I swallowed hard, the truth of her words scraping raw against something vulnerable inside me. For a moment, I almost broke—almost let the messy, honest words tumble out. Almost admitted that I was scared, confused, caught between who I thought I was and who I felt myself becoming whenever she was near.

Instead, I retreated to the bathroom, closing the door behind me with a quiet click. I leaned against the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror—

flushed cheeks, bright eyes, the careful mask of Madeline Hayes slipping dangerously out of place.

"Get it together," I whispered to my reflection. "What is wrong with you?"

But I knew what was wrong, even if I couldn't admit it out loud. Brooke Winters had somehow worked her way under my skin, into places I'd kept carefully guarded. She saw me—not the version I presented to the world, but something truer, something I wasn't sure I was ready to face myself.

I went through my nighttime routine, washing away makeup, applying face cream, brushing teeth. Normal actions that should have grounded me but instead felt like going through the motions, a performance of normalcy when everything inside me felt anything but normal.

When I finally emerged, Brooke was already in her bed, book open in her lap. The silence between us felt both brittle and heavy, charged with too many unspoken things.

I slipped into my own bed, keeping my back to her, staring at the wall as if it might offer answers to questions I was afraid to ask.

"I didn't mean to make you mad earlier," Brooke said suddenly, her voice quiet in the stillness of our room. "When I walked away after the race."

The unexpected olive branch caught me off guard. I rolled onto my back, staring up at the ceiling, not quite ready to face her directly.

"You didn't make me mad," I lied, then sighed. "Okay, maybe a little. I was just... I thought we were okay. After the bar the other night, I thought..."

"Thought what?" she prompted when I didn't continue.

I thought maybe we were friends. I thought maybe we could be something more than the boxes we'd been put in. I thought maybe you were seeing the real me, not just the version I show everyone else.

"I don't know," I said instead, the truth too raw, too complicated to voice.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Brooke said, her voice soft but clear in the dim room. "You don't know what you want. Or maybe you do know, but you're afraid to admit it."

I turned my head to look at her then. She was sitting up in bed, her dark hair loose around her shoulders, the blue of her blouse replaced by a simple gray sleep shirt. In the soft light filtering through the curtains, she looked younger somehow, more vulnerable. But her eyes were steady, unflinching.

"What about you?" I challenged, deflecting. "What do you want, Brooke?"

Something flickered across her face—hesitation, maybe, or resignation. "Clarity," she said finally. "I want people to mean what they say. I want..." She paused, seeming to choose her next words carefully. "I want to not feel like I'm constantly trying to decode someone's mixed signals."

The accusation was clear, even unspoken. I was the one sending mixed signals. I was the one who couldn't decide what I wanted.

"It's not that simple," I said, pushing myself up to sitting, suddenly needing to be on equal footing. "You don't understand—"

"Then explain it to me," she interrupted, an edge of frustration breaking through her usual composure. "Explain why you can sit and talk with me for hours at a bar one night, then completely ignore me the next day. Explain why you look at me like... like *that*, then tell me you don't want anything from me. Explain why you get jealous when I talk to someone else, then go back to your boyfriend like nothing happened."

Her words hit with devastating accuracy, each one finding its mark. I flinched, unable to meet her gaze.

"I don't know how to explain it," I admitted, the confession barely audible. "I don't know how to make sense of any of this."

"Any of what, Madeline?" she pressed. "Just say it. For once, just say what you're actually thinking instead of what you think you're supposed to say."

The challenge hung between us, impossible to ignore. I took a deep breath, searching for words that felt true, that felt honest.

"I like spending time with you," I said finally, the admission feeling like stepping off a cliff. "When we're together, I feel... different. Like I can just be me, not the version of me everyone expects." I traced a pattern on my blanket, still not looking at her. "And it scares me. Because I don't even know who that person is most of the time."

Brooke was quiet for a long moment, and I forced myself to look up, to meet her gaze. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes were softer than they had been all day.

"Do you want to know what I see?" she asked, her voice gentle in a way that made my heart ache. "I see someone trying so hard to be perfect that she's afraid to let anyone see the cracks. I see someone surrounded by

people but still lonely. I see someone capable of being real, being genuine, but terrified of what happens if she lets that show."

Her words stripped me bare, leaving nowhere to hide. I wanted to deflect, to deny, to throw up the walls I'd spent years perfecting. But I was tired of hiding, tired of pretending.

"Maybe you're right," I whispered, the admission both terrifying and somehow freeing. "But I don't know how to be any other way."

"You could start by being honest," she suggested, a hint of the old Brooke—sarcastic, challenging—creeping back into her voice. "With yourself, if no one else."

I hugged my knees to my chest, suddenly feeling very young and very lost. "And what if I don't like what I find?"

Brooke's smile was small but genuine. "That's the risk, isn't it? But maybe what you find is better than what you're hiding from."

Our eyes held across the space between our beds—a chasm that suddenly felt both too wide and not wide enough. There was something in her gaze that made my breath catch, something that felt dangerously close to understanding, to acceptance.

"I should sleep," I said abruptly, breaking the moment before it could pull me in deeper. "Early start tomorrow. Last day on the slopes."

Disappointment flickered across her face, there and gone so quickly I almost missed it. "Yeah," she agreed, settling back against her pillows. "Goodnight, Madeline."

"Goodnight, Brooke."

I lay back down, turning to face the wall again, feeling the weight of all the things still unsaid pressing down on me. As the silence stretched between us, I could hear Brooke's breathing gradually evening out, slowing as she drifted toward sleep.

But I remained awake, staring into the darkness, replaying her words in my mind: *You don't get to want nothing and everything at the same time.*

The truth of it settled over me, uncomfortable but undeniable. I couldn't keep pretending I didn't feel something for Brooke, couldn't keep sending mixed signals, couldn't keep hiding behind the perfect facade I'd spent years constructing.

Be honest with yourself, if no one else.

What did I want? The question echoed in my mind, demanding an answer I wasn't sure I was ready to give.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BROOKE

Darkness settled over our room like a blanket—not comforting, not suffocating, just there. After our conversation, after I had turned to face the wall, a strange silence hung between us. Not cold, exactly, but not warm either. It sat in the space between our beds like something alive, something acknowledged but unnamed.

I stared at the wall, tracing the faint patterns of shadow cast by moonlight filtering through the curtains. Sleep felt impossible, my mind replaying our conversation in endless loops.

"When we're together, I feel different. Like I can just be me, not the version of me everyone expects."

Her words kept cycling through my head, along with my own:

"You don't get to want nothing and everything at the same time, Madeline."

I wasn't even sure who I was angry at anymore. Madeline, for her contradictions and mixed signals? Myself, for caring too much? Or maybe it was the impossible space between us—too far to reach across, too close to ignore.

"Brooke?"

Her voice was soft, hesitant, barely audible in the quiet room. I turned toward the sound, though I could only make out her silhouette in the darkness.

"Yeah?" I answered, my own voice rough from disuse.

"Are you still awake?"

I couldn't help the slight edge of sarcasm that crept into my response. "I just said 'yeah,' so... yeah."

A small laugh escaped her, the sound cutting through the tension like a spark in the darkness. "Right. Sorry."

I expected her to continue, to say whatever had prompted her to break the silence. But she remained quiet, as if gathering her thoughts—or her

courage.

"Did you need something?" I finally asked when the silence stretched too long.

"No," she said quickly, then, "I don't know. I just... couldn't sleep."

"That makes two of us."

Another silence, but somehow less heavy than before. I heard her shifting in her bed, the rustle of blankets as she turned to face me more fully.

"Can I ask you something?" she ventured.

"You just did."

"Something else, smart-ass."

I smiled into the darkness, surprising myself. "Go ahead."

"What was school like for you? You know, before we met," she ventured.

The question caught me off guard. It was so... normal. The kind of thing you'd ask someone you were just getting to know, not in the middle of whatever complicated mess existed between Madeline and me.

"Pretty average," I said after a moment. "I kept to myself mostly. It was easier to be invisible in a good way, not the bad way."

"What's the good way of being invisible?"

I considered her question, trying to put into words something I'd never really articulated before. "When you're known but not... watched. When people see you but don't scrutinize you. I could just exist without having to perform for anyone."

"That sounds nice," she said, her voice softer now, almost wistful. "I don't think I've ever been invisible a day in my life."

"Not even when you want to be?"

"Especially not then." She sighed. "People are always watching, always expecting something. Even when I'm alone, I feel like I'm being judged by some invisible audience."

The admission surprised me with its honesty. This was a side of Madeline I'd only caught glimpses of—vulnerable, reflective, free from the polished persona she presented to the world.

"Now it's my turn" I said. "What was Madeline Hayes like before high school?"

Her laugh was quiet, tinged with something like nostalgia. "Bossy. Dramatic. I used to direct neighborhood plays and force Julian to be in them. I was pretty terrible."

"Not much has changed then," I teased.

"Hey!" she protested, but I could hear the smile in her voice. "I'll have you know I've refined my tyrannical tendencies."

"Is that what you call it?"

She laughed again, the sound somehow lighter, more genuine than I was used to hearing from her. It made something warm unfurl in my chest, something I tried not to examine too closely.

Our conversation flowed from there, easier than it had any right to be given everything that hung between us. There was still tension, but it was shifting into something different, something that made my skin prickle with awareness every time she laughed.

"What's your favorite class?" she asked. "Besides the ones you're annoyingly perfect in."

"History, actually," I admitted. "I took it sophomore year."

"Really? I wouldn't have guessed that."

"There's a lot you wouldn't guess about me."

"Like what?" Her voice had dropped lower, curiosity threading through it.

I hesitated, weighing how much to reveal. "I used to play piano. I can bake a decent soufflé. I secretly love terrible reality TV."

She gasped dramatically. "No. Not *you*. Not serious, sarcastic Brooke Winters."

"Judge all you want, but 'The Bachelor' is peak entertainment."

"Oh my god," she laughed. "Wait till Victoria hears this."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," she challenged, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

"What about you?" I asked. "Any embarrassing secrets the school queen bee doesn't want getting out?"

She was quiet for a moment. "I can't snap my fingers."

"What? How is that possible?"

"I don't know! I just... can't. My thumb doesn't work that way or something."

"Show me," I demanded, suddenly needing to see this ridiculous flaw in her otherwise perfect persona.

"It's dark, genius."

"Hold on." I reached over to the nightstand and switched on the small lamp. Soft golden light spilled across her face, catching in her hair,

illuminating her features in a way that made my breath catch. She squinted slightly against the sudden brightness, her eyes meeting mine with unexpected vulnerability.

"Go on," I prompted, trying to ignore the strange flutter in my chest. "Let's see this tragic disability."

She rolled her eyes but held up her hand, making a pitiful attempt at snapping her fingers. Her thumb and middle finger just sort of slid past each other with a sad little friction sound.

"That's the most pathetic thing I've ever seen," I said, failing to hold back my laughter.

"It's not funny!" she protested, but she was laughing too. "Julian used to torture me about it."

"Poor little rich girl," I teased. "Couldn't snap along with the cool kids." She swatted at my arm. "Shut up. At least I can whistle."

"Who says I can't whistle?"

"Can you?"

I pursed my lips and blew, producing a perfect, clear note.

"Show-off," she muttered.

"My turn again. What's your middle name?" she asked, the question coming seemingly out of nowhere.

"Don't have one."

"You *don't* have a middle name?" Her voice rose in surprise, her eyes widening. The lamplight caught the blue in them, turning them almost silver at the edges.

"Nope."

"That feels illegal."

"Do you?" I countered, trying not to stare at the way the light played across her features.

"Madeline *Grace* Hayes." She said it with a flourish, like it was something precious.

"That's kind of pretty," I admitted, the words coming out softer than I intended.

"*Kind of?*" she said, indignant, propping herself up on one elbow to look down at me. "Rude."

"Okay, it's very pretty," I conceded, suddenly aware of how close her face was to mine. "There. Satisfied?"

She smiled, triumphant, and for a moment we just looked at each other, something unspoken passing between us. I could see the flecks of darker blue in her eyes, the slight curve of her lips, the strand of blonde hair that had fallen across her cheek. I had the sudden, irrational urge to reach up and tuck it behind her ear.

She looked away first, falling back against her pillow with a small laugh that seemed to break whatever spell had momentarily fallen over us. I found myself laughing too, the sound filling our small room with unexpected warmth. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed like this with anyone, let alone with Madeline Hayes.

I switched off the lamp, not trusting myself with the way the light painted her features, making everything between us feel too real, too possible. Darkness felt safer, a shield against whatever was building between us.

After a few minutes of silence, I shifted in my bed, pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders. A slight chill had crept into the room, and I shivered despite myself.

"Are you cold?" Madeline asked, noticing the movement.

"A little."

"That's what you get for picking the bed across the room from the heater."

"You *picked* yours before I could blink," I reminded her.

"Because I'm smarter."

I smirked, even though she couldn't see it in the dark. "Debatable."

"What's to debate? I'm over here all warm and cozy, and you're over there shivering like you're in the Arctic."

"Maybe I like the cold," I countered, though another shiver betrayed my lie.

"Right," she said, skepticism dripping from her voice. "That's why your teeth are practically chattering."

"They are not," I protested, though I was clenching them to keep them from doing exactly that.

A brief silence fell, and then she spoke again, her voice carrying a note of hesitation I wasn't used to hearing from her. "You want to come over here or are you just going to freeze out of spite?"

The offer caught me completely off guard. My heart did a strange stutter-step in my chest, and for a moment, I couldn't find words to respond.

Madeline *Grace* Hayes was inviting me into her bed. The same Madeline who'd been avoiding eye contact with me just hours earlier, who'd run from whatever had been building between us for days.

"I—what?" I managed, suddenly not trusting my hearing.

"The heater's on this side," she explained, as if it were the most logical thing in the world. "And you're clearly freezing. So either grab another blanket or stop being stubborn."

"I'm not being stubborn," I argued weakly.

"You're the definition of stubborn," she countered. "It's actually impressive how stubborn you are."

"Says the girl who threw a fit because I called her middle name 'kind of pretty.'"

"That was a legitimate grievance."

I laughed despite myself, the sound breaking some of the tension that had gathered in my chest. "You're ridiculous."

"And you're avoiding the question," she said. "Are you coming over here or not? Because I'm getting cold just thinking about how cold you must be."

I hesitated, weighing the dangers of proximity against the cold that had settled into my bones. Getting into bed with Madeline felt like crossing a line, like stepping over some invisible boundary we'd established between us. But the thought of her warmth, of closing the distance that had stretched between us for so long, was irresistibly tempting.

"Fine," I said finally, trying to sound put-upon rather than nervous. "But only because hypothermia isn't on my agenda for tonight."

"Such a drama queen," she teased.

With a dramatic sigh I hoped would mask my sudden nervousness, I grabbed my pillow.

"You're the worst," I said, standing up.

"And yet here you are," she replied, scooting over to make room. There was something almost smug in her voice, as if she'd won a game I hadn't realized we were playing.

I crossed the short distance between our beds, hyperaware of each step, of how surreal this moment felt. This was Madeline *Grace* Hayes—queen bee, social royalty, the girl who'd barely acknowledged my existence before I became her tutor—making room for me in her bed as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I slipped under her covers, careful to maintain some distance between us. But the bed wasn't large, and immediately I was enveloped in her warmth, her scent—something expensive and floral that made my head swim slightly. The air between us felt charged, electric, as if the slightest movement might spark something dangerous.

"Better?" she asked, her voice closer now, intimate in the darkness.

"Yeah," I managed, hyperaware of her presence beside me. "Thanks."

We lay there in silence for a moment, adjusting to this new reality of shared space. I could hear her breathing, could feel the subtle shift of the mattress with each of her movements. It was both terrifying and exhilarating, this closeness we'd never allowed ourselves before.

"Can I ask you something else?" she said, breaking the silence.

"You're full of questions tonight."

"Just answer, Winters."

I turned my head slightly toward her voice. "Fine. What?"

"Why did you hit Julian? I mean, I know what he said, but... you don't seem like the type to just punch someone."

The question sobered me instantly. I stared up at the ceiling, considering how much to reveal, how much of myself to expose.

"My mom," I said finally, my voice lower than before. "She was everything to me. When she died... people either disappeared or they treated me like I was made of glass. Like grief was contagious. Julian using that against me—it just hit a nerve."

I felt rather than saw Madeline nod. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "About your mom. And about Julian being an ass."

"It's not your fault."

"Still." Her hand found mine under the covers, her fingers wrapping around mine in a gentle squeeze that sent a jolt through my entire body. "He shouldn't have said that."

I swallowed hard, acutely aware of her touch, of the way her thumb brushed across my knuckles before she pulled away. The gesture was so brief, so simple, but it left me feeling unmoored, adrift in unfamiliar waters.

"What about you?" I asked, desperate to shift the focus away from the sudden tightness in my chest. "Any more deep, dark secrets you want to share while we're having this middle-school sleepover moment?"

She laughed, the sound vibrating through the small space between us.
"Like what?"

"I don't know. Embarrassing childhood stories? Hidden talents? Your biggest fear?"

"You sound like a bad personality quiz."

"Just answer, Hayes," I mimicked her earlier tone.

She was quiet for a moment, considering. "I used to want to be an artist," she admitted finally. "Like, professionally. I was obsessed with it when I was younger."

"What changed?"

"My parents being my parents." The bitterness in her voice was subtle but unmistakable. "Art isn't a 'real career.' It's a 'hobby,' something to do in your spare time while you pursue something 'worthwhile.'"

"That's bullshit," I said without thinking. "You're really good."

Even in the darkness, I could sense her surprise. "You think so?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

"Right. You're not exactly known for empty compliments."

"Not my style," I agreed.

"What is your style, then?" she asked, her voice taking on a teasing edge.

"Brutal honesty and scathing wit. Thought that was obvious by now."

She laughed again, the sound warming me more effectively than any heater could. "You're awfully full of yourself for someone who wears the same three hoodies on rotation."

"You're awfully judgmental for someone who thought North Dakota was made up until last semester," I fired back without thinking.

Madeline burst into laughter—real, open, unfiltered laughter that seemed to light her up from the inside out. It wasn't the controlled, practiced laugh she used at school. This was something raw and genuine, unguarded in a way I'd rarely seen her.

I couldn't help but watch her—the way her head tilted back, the way her body shook with mirth, the way her eyes crinkled at the corners. The lamp cast a warm glow across her skin, turning her hair golden against the pillow we now shared. She didn't hold back for once, didn't seem to care how she looked or sounded. This wasn't the carefully controlled Madeline who navigated school hallways like she owned them. This was someone real, someone unguarded, someone who laughed until she snorted softly and then covered her mouth, eyes wide with embarrassment.

"Did you just snort?" I asked, delighted by this unexpected crack in her perfect facade.

"No," she denied immediately, her cheeks flushing pink. "Absolutely not."

"You totally did," I insisted, grinning. "Madeline *Grace* Hayes snorts when she laughs. Wait till the cheer squad hears about this."

She groaned, covering her face with her hands, laughing despite herself. "If you tell anyone, I'll deny it. And then I'll have to kill you."

The air between us felt charged, electric, as if the slightest movement might spark something dangerous. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears, could feel the weight of something shifting between us. I'd never been so aware of another person's proximity, of the rise and fall of her chest with each breath, of the small space between her lips.

It was like standing on the edge of a cliff, knowing that one step forward would send me falling into something unknown, something that could either break me or set me free. I'd spent years building walls, keeping everyone at a safe distance. But with Madeline looking at me like that, those walls seemed paper-thin, ready to crumble at the slightest touch.

This was insane. She had a boyfriend. She was the Madeline *Grace* Hayes, for god's sake—the girl who ran hot and cold, the girl who claimed she didn't want anything from me. Kissing her would be a catastrophic mistake.

But I couldn't remember why that mattered anymore, not with her looking at me like she'd never really seen me before, like I was something surprising and precious and terrifying all at once.

The realization hit me with shocking clarity: I wanted to kiss her. I'd wanted to kiss her since that night she walked in on me changing, maybe even before that. I wanted to know if her lips were as soft as they looked, if she tasted like the expensive lip gloss she always wore, if she would make that same small gasp I'd heard when I'd leaned too close while fastening her necklace.

Her laughter had subsided almost completely now, but the smile remained, softening her features. She turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting mine fully across the pillow, illuminated by the lamp's golden glow and somehow more striking than I'd ever seen them.

"What?" she asked, noticing my stare, her voice barely above a whisper.

I didn't answer. Couldn't answer. The words wouldn't come, trapped somewhere between my racing thoughts and my hammering heart.

Instead, I leaned in and kissed her.

It was a terrible idea. I knew it even as I was doing it. But I couldn't stop myself, couldn't fight the gravitational pull that had been drawing me toward her from the moment she'd walked in on me that night, maybe even before.

The kiss was soft at first, tentative. Just the gentle press of my lips against hers, a question more than a demand. But then she made a small sound—somewhere between a gasp and a sigh—and suddenly everything shifted.

The kiss deepened, her mouth opening to mine like she'd been waiting for this too, like she'd been thinking about it as long as I had. Warmth bloomed between us, spreading through my body like wildfire. My hand found her waist, fingers curling into the fabric of her sleep shirt, pulling her closer.

Madeline kissed me back with an intensity that matched my own, her fingers tangling in my hair, her body arching slightly toward mine. For one perfect, endless moment, the world narrowed to just this—the soft press of her lips, the warmth of her skin, the feeling that I'd finally found something I hadn't known I was looking for.

Then, abruptly, she pulled back. Her breathing was ragged, her eyes wide with something like panic as she stared at me in the darkness.

"I—I can't," she whispered, her voice breaking on the words.

Before I could respond, before I could process what was happening, she was scrambling out of the bed, her movements frantic and uncoordinated. She grabbed something—her phone, maybe—from the nightstand and headed for the door.

"Madeline—wait," I called, following her, heart hammering against my ribs. "Please, wait—"

But the door shut behind her with a quiet click, leaving me standing alone in the middle of our room, the ghost of her lips still burning against mine.

I stood frozen for a moment, staring at the empty space where she'd just been. Then, slowly, the reality of what I'd done began to sink in. I'd kissed Madeline *Grace* Hayes. I'd kissed a girl who had a boyfriend, who'd made it

clear she wasn't sure what she wanted, who'd just run away like I'd burned her.

"What have I done," I whispered, running my hands through my hair, a deep breath shuddering through me like it might tear my chest open.

The silence that followed was deafening, pressing in from all sides, heavy with the weight of my mistake. I'd ruined whatever tentative friendship we'd been building, crossed a line I couldn't uncross. And for what? A moment of weakness, of giving in to something I shouldn't have wanted in the first place?

I sank onto the edge of my bed, mind racing through potential damage control. Should I leave? Find somewhere else to sleep tonight? Would she tell someone what happened? Would—

The door burst open.

Madeline stood in the doorway, breathless, something wild and unreadable blazing in her eyes. Her hair was disheveled, her chest rising and falling rapidly as if she'd been running, or maybe fighting some internal battle I couldn't see.

I took a step forward, guilt spilling out of me in a rush of words. "Madeline, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

She cut me off mid-sentence, already crossing the room with purposeful strides. "Just shut up and kiss me."

Before I could process her words, she'd reached me, her hands coming up to grasp my face, fingers threading into my hair as she pulled me toward her.

And kissed me.

This wasn't the hesitant, questioning kiss from before. This was decisive, desperate, a claiming. Her mouth moved against mine with purpose, with hunger, drawing a surprised gasp from my throat that she swallowed eagerly. My hands found her waist automatically, pulling her closer until there was no space left between us, until I could feel the hammering of her heart against my own.

The world tilted on its axis, everything I thought I knew about the *brehtaking* Madeline Grace Hayes, about myself, about us, reconfiguring into something new and terrifying and exhilarating. Nothing existed beyond this room, this moment, the feeling of her in my arms, the taste of her on my tongue, the soft sounds she made as I kissed her back with everything I had.

Madeline Hayes was kissing me. And I was kissing her back. And nothing would ever be the same again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MADELINE

Just shut up and kiss me."

The words had barely left my lips before I was crossing the room, my body moving with a certainty my mind couldn't match. My hands found Brooke's face, fingers threading into her hair, pulling her toward me with an urgency that surprised even me.

And then I was kissing her. Not because I should. Because I *had* to.

The first press of my lips against hers sent electricity coursing through me, a jolt so intense I nearly pulled away from the shock of it. But Brooke's hands found my waist, steadying me, holding me close, and suddenly I was falling into the kiss, into her, into everything I'd been denying myself.

It was messy, desperate, hungry. Nothing like the hesitant kiss she'd initiated earlier. This was raw need, the culmination of every charged glance, every almost-touch, every moment of tension that had been building between us since that first night in this room. My lips parted against hers, inviting her deeper, and she responded immediately, her tongue sliding against mine in a way that drew a soft moan from my throat.

Brooke's hands tightened on my waist, fingers digging into my skin through the thin fabric of my sleep shirt. The pressure of her touch was possessive, confident, sending shivers racing down my spine. Without breaking the kiss, her hands slid lower, gripping my thighs with unexpected strength.

In one fluid motion that stole my breath, she lifted me off the ground. My legs instinctively wrapped around her waist, ankles crossing at the small of her back to anchor myself against her. The sudden elevation made me gasp into her mouth, my arms tightening around her neck for support. The feeling of being weightless, of being held so effortlessly in her arms, sent a rush of heat flooding through me.

"Brooke," I breathed against her lips, surprised and aroused by this display of strength.

She didn't respond with words. Instead, she secured her grip beneath my thighs and carried me toward the bed, her steps sure and steady despite the darkness, despite the weight of me wrapped around her. Her muscles flexed beneath my touch, the definition I'd glimpsed that night she stood half-dressed now evident in the way she held me like I weighed nothing at all.

The few steps to the bed felt like an eternity and no time at all. Her lips never left mine, the kiss deepening as she walked, her tongue sliding against mine in a way that made me whimper. I could feel her heartbeat hammering against my chest, matching the frantic rhythm of my own. My fingers tangled in her hair, tugging slightly, drawing a low groan from deep in her throat that vibrated through me.

When she reached the bed, she lowered me onto it with surprising gentleness, the contrast between her strength and her care making my heart stutter. She followed me down, her body hovering over mine, her weight settling partially on top of me as the mattress dipped beneath us. Her thigh slipped between mine, creating a delicious pressure that made me arch against her, seeking more contact, more of her.

For a brief moment, she pulled back, her eyes searching mine in the dim light. I could see questions there, hesitation—was this okay, did I want this, was she going too fast? I answered by pulling her back down to me, reclaiming her lips, arching my body up to meet hers.

"Brooke," I whispered against her mouth, the first word either of us had spoken since this began. Her name felt different on my tongue now, weighted with desire, with need.

She responded by trailing kisses along my jawline, down the column of my throat, finding the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder. I gasped as she nipped gently at the skin there, then soothed it with her tongue. My hands found their way under the hem of her shirt, fingers spreading across the warm skin of her back, tracing the ridges of her spine.

Brooke shivered at my touch, her breath hitching against my neck. She shifted, one of her thighs pressing between mine, creating a delicious pressure that made me whimper. I hadn't known I could make that sound, hadn't known I could want someone this badly, hadn't known desire could feel like drowning and flying all at once.

"Is this okay?" she murmured against my skin, her voice rough with want but edged with concern.

"Yes," I breathed, my fingers digging into her shoulders. "Don't stop."

She kissed me again, deeper this time, slower, like she was memorizing the taste of me. Her hand slipped beneath my shirt, palm flat against my stomach, fingers splayed wide. I felt the callouses on her fingertips—from snowboarding, from climbing, from a life lived with her whole body—and the contrast of rough against smooth sent shivers across my skin.

Her hand inched higher, hesitating just below my breast, waiting for permission. I arched into her touch in answer, and she cupped me gently, her thumb brushing across my nipple through the thin fabric of my bra. The sensation tore another gasp from my throat, my body responding with a heat that pooled low in my abdomen.

Time lost meaning as we moved together, exploring each other with hands and lips and whispered breaths. Clothes shifted but didn't fully disappear—my shirt pushed up, her pants riding low on her hips, exposing a strip of skin I couldn't stop touching. We didn't cross certain lines, didn't go as far as we could have, but it was enough—more than enough—to leave me breathless, trembling, completely undone.

Brooke's weight on top of me was grounding, a delicious pressure that kept me from floating away on the waves of sensation. Her lips never seemed to leave my skin for long, always returning to my mouth, my neck, the sensitive spot behind my ear that made me shiver when she found it. I traced the muscles of her back, her shoulders, the curve of her waist, committing every inch to memory.

"You're beautiful," she whispered against my collarbone, the words vibrating against my skin. "So beautiful."

No one had ever said those words to me and made me believe them like she did. Not Sam, not the countless boys who'd tried to catch my attention, not the photographers at family events who positioned me just so for the perfect shot. There was a rawness to Brooke's voice, an honesty that cut through all my defenses.

When her hand brushed the waistband of my sleep shorts, fingers tracing the sensitive skin just beneath the elastic, my hips instinctively lifted toward her touch. Heat pooled low in my abdomen, a delicious ache building with every caress of her fingers. Brooke's eyes locked with mine, dark and intent, pupils blown wide with desire. Her thumb traced slow circles against my hip bone, each movement deliberate, testing boundaries without crossing them.

"Is this okay?" she whispered, her voice rough with want.

"Yes," I breathed, reaching up to pull her back down to me, capturing her lips in a kiss that conveyed everything I couldn't say aloud—my need, my trust, my surrender.

Brooke responded with equal fervor, her kisses growing deeper, more consuming. She shifted her weight, her thigh pressing more firmly between mine, creating a rhythm that had me gasping against her mouth. Her hand slipped beneath my shirt again, tracing the curve of my ribs, the sensitive skin beneath my breast. Every touch was electric, lighting fires across my skin that made me tremble beneath her.

Time dissolved as we moved together, learning each other's bodies through touch and taste. Brooke's mouth found the pulse point at my neck, her teeth grazing lightly before her tongue soothed the sting. I arched beneath her, my fingers tangled in her hair, holding her close, never wanting her to stop. The pressure built within me, a coiling tension that grew with each roll of her hips against mine, each stroke of her fingers across my heated skin.

When the wave finally broke, it was unexpected and overwhelming. I clung to her, burying my face against her shoulder to muffle the sound that escaped me, my body shuddering beneath hers. Brooke held me through it, her arms strong and steady, her lips pressed against my temple, whispering words I couldn't quite catch but felt in my soul.

As the tremors subsided, she gathered me close, tucking my head beneath her chin. I could hear her heart racing, could feel the slight tremble in her arms that betrayed her own unsatisfied desire. But she asked for nothing, content to hold me as I caught my breath, as the world slowly came back into focus.

"That was..." I whispered, unable to find words adequate for what had just happened.

"I know," she murmured against my hair, her voice soft and intimate in the darkness.

We lay tangled together, trading lazy kisses as our breathing slowed, as the heat between us banked to a warm glow rather than a consuming fire. My fingers traced patterns on her back, memorizing the feel of her, the weight of her beside me, the scent of her skin. It was the most intimate moment I'd ever shared with anyone, not because of what we'd done but because of how completely I'd let myself go, how fully I'd trusted her with my vulnerability.

I turned to face her, our foreheads touching, breaths mingling in the small space between us. Her eyes were dark in the dim light of our room, pupils blown wide with desire, but there was something else there too—a vulnerability that matched my own. We were both diving into uncharted waters, both terrified and exhilarated by what we'd found.

We didn't talk about what it meant, about Sam, about tomorrow, about anything beyond the walls of our room. Words seemed inadequate, unnecessary in the face of what we'd just shared. Instead, we lay together, trading lazy kisses that gradually slowed as exhaustion claimed us. I rested my head on her shoulder, my arm draped across her stomach, our legs tangled together beneath the blankets. Her fingers traced patterns on my back, soothing, gentle.

The last thing I remember before sleep claimed me was the steady rhythm of her heartbeat against my ear, the rise and fall of her chest beneath my cheek, the feeling of absolute rightness that had settled in my bones.

I woke to an empty bed.

The sheets beside me were still warm, the pillow still holding the indentation of Brooke's head, but she was gone. For a moment, I just lay there, disoriented, my body still heavy with sleep. Then memory rushed back—her lips on mine, her hands on my skin, the sounds she'd made when I touched her—and with it came a wave of panic.

Had she left? Really left? Was it just a moment for her? Did she regret it the moment she woke up?

My heart hammered against my ribs as I sat up, scanning the room frantically. Her suitcase was still there, her clothes still hanging in the closet, but no sign of her. Had she gone to breakfast already? Was she avoiding me?

And then I saw it—a folded piece of paper on the nightstand, my name scrawled across the top in Brooke's messy handwriting. I snatched it up, my hands trembling slightly as I unfolded it.

Dear Madeline, Gone snowboarding. Try not to fall on your face again. Best wishes, Brooke.

I stared at the note, reading it once, twice, a third time. And then, unexpectedly, I laughed—a full, genuine laugh that bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me.

Because it was exactly what she'd said she'd write. When I'd complained about her leaving without waking me, she'd sarcastically suggested leaving

a note with these exact words. She'd remembered. Of course she had.

I pressed the note to my chest, closing my eyes, feeling the rapid beating of my heart through the paper. The relief was so intense it almost hurt, washing away the panic that had gripped me moments before. Brooke hadn't left me. She'd just gone snowboarding, like she did every morning. And she'd left me a note—sarcastic, teasing, perfectly Brooke.

I fell back against the pillows, the note still clutched in my hand, a smile I couldn't control spreading across my face. I didn't know what this was—what we were—but I knew it was *something*. Something that made my heart race and my skin tingle and my cheeks flush with warmth.

The giddiness lasted through my shower, through getting dressed, through the walk to the dining hall for breakfast. It was like floating, like being untethered from gravity, like the world had suddenly shifted into brighter, sharper focus.

And then I saw Sam.

He was sitting at our usual table, Julian across from him, both of them laughing at something on Julian's phone. Sam looked up as I approached, his face lighting up with that same genuine smile he always had for me. The smile of my boyfriend. My boyfriend who had no idea I'd spent last night wrapped in someone else's arms, someone else's kisses.

Reality crashed back with brutal force, the guilt hitting me like a physical blow. Sam was a good guy—kind, loyal, uncomplicated. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve me kissing someone else, wanting someone else, while he sat here waiting for me, completely oblivious.

"Hey, you," he said, scooting over to make room for me. "Sleep well?"

The question was so innocent, so normal, and yet it sent a flush of heat to my cheeks. Did I sleep well? Wrapped around Brooke, her breath warm against my neck, her arm a comfortable weight across my waist? Yes, I'd slept better than I had in years.

"Yeah," I managed, sliding onto the bench beside him. "Really well, actually."

"You look different," Victoria said from across the table, her eyes narrowing as she studied my face. "Are you glowing? Why are you glowing?"

"I'm not," I replied quickly, busying myself with pouring a glass of orange juice.

"You definitely are," Audrey agreed, leaning forward to examine me more closely. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing," I insisted. "I'm just in a good mood."

"Since when?" Victoria pressed, not ready to let it go.

I shrugged, avoiding her gaze. "Can't a girl just be happy?"

"Not without a reason," Victoria countered, suspicion clear in her voice. "Especially not you, especially not after how weird you've been this whole trip."

Before I could respond, Julian jumped in. "Leave her alone, Vic. Maybe she's just excited about heading home today."

I shot him a grateful look, surprised by the unexpected rescue. Julian, for all his faults, had his moments. Though if he knew the real reason for my "glow," he'd probably be the first to throw me under the bus.

The conversation moved on, shifting to plans for the final morning on the slopes, who had packed already and who was procrastinating until the last minute. Sam's arm draped around my shoulders, a familiar weight that now felt strangely intrusive. I let it stay there, too afraid of raising suspicion if I pulled away, but each minute it remained felt like a betrayal—of Sam, of Brooke, of myself.

I couldn't focus on the chatter around me, couldn't join in the excited planning for one last day on the mountain. My mind was elsewhere, replaying the events of last night, wondering where Brooke was now, if she was thinking of me too. Despite the guilt churning in my stomach, despite the knowledge that I had a difficult conversation ahead with Sam, despite the uncertainty of what came next—underneath it all, I was happy. Genuinely, irrationally, terrifyingly happy.

"Earth to Madeline," Julian said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You with us?"

I blinked, pulling myself back to the present. "Sorry, what?"

"We're heading out," he said, gesturing to the group already standing, gathering their things. "Last chance to hit the slopes before we leave. You coming or what?"

"Yeah," I nodded, standing quickly. "Let me grab my stuff and I'll meet you guys at the lifts."

As we exited the dining hall, I fell into step beside Sam, hyperaware of his presence, of the easy way he reached for my hand without thinking. His fingers interlaced with mine, warm and familiar, but all I could think about

was how different it felt from Brooke's touch, how his hand didn't send that same electricity racing through my veins.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low, concern etched across his features. "You seem distracted."

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing a smile. "Just... processing that this is our last day, you know? It's been a strange trip."

He nodded, accepting my explanation without question, his trust in me another twist of the knife. "I know what you mean. But hey, we had fun, right?"

"Right," I agreed, the word sticking in my throat.

We parted at the lodge entrance, Sam heading to the equipment check to get his skis while I returned to our room for my gear. The walk through the quiet resort gave me a moment to breathe, to try to sort through the chaos in my chest. I needed to talk to Sam. I needed to end things. It wasn't fair to him to continue this when my heart was so clearly elsewhere. But the thought of that conversation, of the hurt I would cause, made my stomach clench with dread.

Back in our room, I changed quickly into my snow gear, my gaze continually drawn to Brooke's side of the room, to her empty bed, to the tiny traces of her presence that now felt so significant. A hair elastic on the nightstand. A book left open, spine up. The faint scent of her shampoo lingering in the air.

I tucked her note into the pocket of my jacket, a talisman against doubt, against the fear that last night might have been a dream. Then I grabbed my board and headed for the slopes, my heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

The resort was busy, everyone trying to squeeze in one last run before check-out. I scanned the crowds as I made my way toward the lifts, searching for a glimpse of dark hair, for the unmistakable grace of Brooke on her board. Sam and the others were already in the lift line, waving me over, but I pretended not to see them, continuing my search.

And then—*there she was*.

Brooke stood near the ski lift, alone, adjusting her gloves, her dark hair pulled back beneath a blue beanie. She moved with that quiet confidence that had first caught my attention on the slopes, that had drawn my eye even before I understood why. The morning sun caught in her hair, highlighting strands of hidden gold, and even from a distance, she was breathtaking.

I didn't think. I didn't plan. I just ran, my feet carrying me toward her before my brain could catch up, before doubt could take hold. I was vaguely aware of Sam calling my name, of Julian's confused expression, of Victoria's narrowed eyes, but none of it mattered. Nothing mattered except reaching Brooke, seeing her face, confirming that what had happened between us was real.

As I approached, she looked up, her expression shifting from surprise to something softer, something that made my heart stutter in my chest. She straightened, waiting for me, her lips curving into a small, private smile that I knew was just for me.

"Hey," I said, suddenly breathless, suddenly unsure what to do with my hands, with my face, with the overwhelming feeling of rightness that washed over me just from being near her again.

"Hey yourself," she replied, her voice low, intimate, even in the midst of the bustling resort. Her eyes searched mine, looking for reassurance, for confirmation, for any sign of regret.

I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to touch her face, to feel her arms around me again, to lose myself in the warmth of her mouth. But we were surrounded by people—by our classmates, by Sam, by all the obstacles that stood between us and whatever this was becoming.

So instead, I smiled, hoping she could read in my eyes what I couldn't say aloud.

"I got your note," I said, pulling it from my pocket as evidence.

Her smile widened, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Did it meet your exacting standards?"

"It exceeded them actually," I replied, matching her teasing tone while trying to convey so much more beneath the words. "Very thoughtful of you."

"I'm nothing if not thoughtful," she said, the quirk of her eyebrow suggesting she was thinking of last night, of the care she'd taken with me, of the gentleness beneath her passion.

The memory made heat rise to my cheeks, made my breath catch in my throat. Last night had changed everything. There was no going back, no pretending it hadn't happened, no returning to who I was before I knew what it felt like to have Brooke's lips on mine, her hands on my skin, her name on my tongue.

But it had also complicated everything. Sam was walking toward us now, confusion clear on his face. Our friends were watching, whispering, no doubt wondering why I'd run to Brooke like she was a lifeline in stormy seas. The carefully constructed world I'd built was crumbling around me, and I didn't know how to navigate the ruins.

All I knew was that I didn't want to let this go—whatever *this* was. I didn't want to lose the way Brooke made me feel, didn't want to go back to being the version of Madeline Hayes who wore masks so perfect she forgot her own face underneath. For the first time in my life, I felt real, felt seen, felt alive in my own skin.

And I would fight for that feeling, no matter what came next.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BROOKE

I'd been up since dawn, carving through fresh powder, finding solace in the familiar rhythm of snowboarding—push, glide, turn, breathe. The mountain had always been my refuge, the one place where everything made sense, where I felt most like myself. But today, even the perfect conditions couldn't keep my mind from wandering back to our room, to tangled sheets and hushed breaths and the feeling of Madeline *Grace* Hayes trembling beneath my touch.

Last night had changed everything. Or maybe it had just revealed what had been building all along, beneath the layers of antagonism and reluctant attraction. Either way, I couldn't stop replaying it in my head—the way she'd burst through the door, the fierce determination in her eyes, the words that had set everything in motion.

"Just shut up and kiss me."

And I had. God, I had. The memory of her taste, her sounds, her skin against mine was so vivid it made my heart race even now, hours later, as I adjusted my gloves near the lift.

I wasn't sure what would happen next. Maybe she'd wake up and regret everything. Maybe she'd go back to Sam, to her friends, to the life she'd carefully constructed. Maybe last night was just a moment of weakness, of curiosity, nothing more.

But I'd left her the note anyway. A small act of hope disguised as sarcasm.

Dear Madeline, Gone snowboarding. Try not to fall on your face again. Best wishes, Brooke.

I smiled to myself, remembering how I'd deliberated over those words, how I'd nearly crumpled the paper a dozen times before leaving it on her nightstand. It was exactly what I'd sarcastically suggested I'd write that time she complained about me leaving without waking her. A small inside joke, a

thread connecting us across time, a silent acknowledgment that I remembered the details.

The memory of her asleep beside me that morning sent a wave of warmth through my chest. She'd looked so peaceful, so different from the carefully composed Madeline *Grace* Hayes everyone else saw. Her golden hair spread across the pillow, her lips slightly parted, her body curled toward mine as if seeking my warmth even in sleep. It had taken every ounce of willpower to slip out of bed without waking her, to leave her there while I sought the clarity of the mountain.

Now, as the morning wore on and the slopes filled with other students enjoying their last day, I found myself scanning the crowds, watching the lift lines, searching for a glimpse of her. Would she seek me out? Would she avoid me? The uncertainty was maddening, yet somehow exhilarating too.

I was so lost in thought that I almost missed the commotion—the sound of quick footsteps, the murmurs of surprise from people around me. When I looked up, my heart nearly stopped.

Madeline was running toward me.

Not walking, not casually approaching—*running*, as if she couldn't bear to waste another second apart. Her blonde hair streamed behind her, catching the sunlight like spun gold. Her face was flushed, whether from exertion or emotion I couldn't tell, but there was something wild and beautiful about her in that moment, something free and unrestrained that I'd never seen before.

People were staring—of course they were. Madeline Hayes didn't run toward anyone, least of all Brooke Winters. But she didn't seem to notice or care, her attention fixed solely on me as she approached.

And in that moment, I felt something shift inside me. Not like falling, which is what I'd feared since the first time I realized I was attracted to her. This felt like landing—solid, certain, a coming home I hadn't known I was searching for.

She reached me, slightly breathless, her cheeks pink with cold and exertion, her eyes bright with something that looked dangerously like joy. My note was clutched in her gloved hand, a detail that sent a ridiculous flutter through my chest.

"Hey," she said, as if we were picking up a conversation we'd just paused, as if there weren't a thousand unspoken things hanging between us.

"Hey yourself," I replied, aiming for casual but landing somewhere closer to reverent.

Her eyes searched mine, looking for what, I wasn't sure—regret? Uncertainty? She wouldn't find either. Whatever this was, whatever last night had started, I was all in. The realization should have terrified me, but instead, it filled me with a strange, steady calm.

"I got your note," she said, holding up the folded paper like evidence.

"Did it meet your exacting standards?" I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips.

Her answering smile was like the sun breaking through clouds. "It exceeded them actually. Very thoughtful of you."

"I'm nothing if not thoughtful," I replied, the double meaning clear in my voice, in the way I held her gaze a beat too long.

She blushed, the memory of exactly how thoughtful I could be clearly flashing across her mind. For a moment, we just looked at each other, the rest of the world fading to background noise—the chatter of other students, the mechanical whir of the lifts, the distant shouts of skiers on the slopes. None of it mattered compared to the electricity arcing between us, the gravity that seemed to pull us closer even as we stood still.

Then Madeline leaned in, her voice dropping to a near whisper, intimate and conspiratorial. "Let's skip this run. Come back to the room with me."

The implication was clear in her eyes, in the slight catch of her breath, in the way she swayed toward me almost imperceptibly. My body responded instantly, heat flooding through me at the thought of being alone with her again, of picking up where we'd left off last night.

But something held me back—not doubt, not reluctance, but a different kind of wanting. I wanted more than just stolen moments in a dark room. I wanted to see her laugh in the sunlight, wanted to share something with her beyond the intense, consuming passion that had overtaken us last night.

"I have a better idea," I said, not missing the flash of surprise in her eyes.

She opened her mouth to respond, but a voice cut through the moment, sharp and confused.

"Mads?"

Sam. Of course it was Sam.

He jogged toward us, confusion and concern etched across his handsome face. I didn't flinch, didn't look away, didn't retreat into guilt or shame. I simply waited, a strange calm settling over me as Madeline turned to face

her boyfriend, her body angling slightly toward mine even as she addressed him.

"Hey," she said, her voice impressively steady. "I'm not feeling great. Gonna sit this one out."

It wasn't entirely a lie. There was something off in her voice, a strain that could easily be interpreted as physical discomfort rather than the emotional turmoil I knew she must be feeling.

Sam stepped forward, concern deepening. "I'll walk you back. Or stay with you."

The offer was so earnest, so genuinely caring, that I might have felt bad for him if I wasn't so completely focused on Madeline, on the tension radiating from her as she searched for a response that wouldn't hurt him but wouldn't separate us either.

Before she could speak, I cut in, my voice low and calm, with just a hint of possessiveness that surprised even me.

"She's good. I'll take her."

I didn't ask, didn't phrase it as a suggestion or a question. I simply stated it as fact, as if my right to be the one who cared for Madeline was already established, already understood. And then, in a move that felt both reckless and absolutely right, I reached for her hand, my fingers interlacing with hers.

The shock on Sam's face was immediate—confusion giving way to dawning realization as his gaze dropped to our linked hands. Madeline's fingers tightened around mine, not pulling away but gripping harder, as if drawing strength from the connection.

"We were just heading back," I added, my thumb brushing across her knuckles in a gesture that was unmistakably intimate.

Sam's eyes darted between us, his brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. "I... okay," he said finally, his voice hollow with confusion. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Madeline said quietly, and though I knew the words would hurt him, there was a firmness to them that made my heart swell.

I didn't wait for further discussion, for questions or accusations or the fallout that would inevitably come. I simply tugged gently on Madeline's hand and turned away, leading her through the crowd that had begun to gather, whispers following in our wake.

"Where are we going?" she asked once we were out of earshot, her voice a mixture of nerves and excitement. "And that wasn't exactly subtle, you know."

"No, it wasn't," I agreed, still leading her away from the main slopes, away from prying eyes and curious whispers. "And we're not going back to the room."

"We're not?"

"Trust me," I said, glancing back at her with a smile I couldn't suppress. "I know a better place."

Instead of heading toward the lodge, I guided her off the main trail, down a narrow path dusted in pristine snow. We moved in comfortable silence, our linked hands swinging slightly between us, our breaths creating small clouds in the crisp air. The path wound through a stand of pine trees, their branches heavy with snow, creating a natural tunnel that felt like it was leading us into another world—one where nothing existed but the two of us.

Finally, we emerged into a small clearing at the top of a gentle slope. At the bottom, half-hidden by a drift of snow, were two wooden toboggans leaning against a tree trunk.

Madeline stopped, staring at the sleds, then at me, her expression caught between disbelief and amusement. "Are we seriously sledding right now?"

"It's called tobogganing," I corrected, already walking toward them, tugging her along with me. "Don't insult the tradition."

"You're kidding," she said, but she followed me anyway, her steps quickening to match mine.

"You wanted to skip the run," I pointed out, releasing her hand to brush snow off one of the sleds. "This is better."

"Better than warm blankets and a bed?" she challenged, one eyebrow raised, a teasing note in her voice that sent heat racing through me.

I grinned, looking up at her as I positioned the toboggan at the top of the slope. "You already had the bed. Time to round out the vacation package."

"And what exactly does this package include?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest, but the smile playing at the corners of her lips betrayed her amusement.

"Speed, bruises, adrenaline, and a dangerous amount of charm," I replied without missing a beat, dropping into the front seat of the sled. "It's a full experience."

"You're unbelievable," she said, shaking her head, but she was laughing now, the sound free and unrestrained in a way I'd rarely heard from her.

"Yet here you are," I pointed out, patting the space behind me. "Get on, Maddie. Don't make me beg."

Something flickered in her eyes at the nickname—surprise, pleasure, a hint of heat. "Tempting," she said, but she was already moving toward me, settling onto the sled behind me, her thighs bracketing mine, her chest pressed against my back.

Her arms wrapped around my waist, holding tight, her chin resting on my shoulder. The fit of our bodies was so perfect it made my breath catch. Even through layers of winter clothing, her warmth seeped into me, her breath warm against my ear as she whispered, "If we fall, I'm suing you."

I smirked, unable to resist turning my head slightly so my lips nearly brushed her cheek.

"Well, you better hold on tight then, Maddie—wouldn't want you to fall for me twice in 24 hours."

She let out a breathy laugh that I felt more than heard, her arms tightening around me. "You are so cheesy."

"You didn't think that last night," I murmured, lowering my voice to a register that made her shiver against me. "Now *did you?*"

Her sharp intake of breath was all the confirmation I needed. I could almost feel the heat rising to her cheeks, could picture the flush spreading across her skin.

"I hate you," she said, but there was no conviction in it, only a breathless kind of want.

"You really don't," I countered, confidence surging through me at the way her fingers flexed against my stomach.

"Shut up and go."

"Gladly."

I pushed off with my hands, sending us hurtling down the slope with a jolt of speed that had Madeline squealing in a mixture of terror and delight. The wind whipped past us, stinging our cheeks, sending snow spraying up on either side as the toboggan picked up speed. Madeline's grip on me was almost painfully tight, her face buried against my shoulder, but I could feel her laughing, could feel the rush of joy that matched my own.

The slope was steeper than it had looked from the top, the toboggan flying over small bumps that sent us temporarily airborne before crashing

back down with teeth-rattling impact. I steered as best I could, leaning into turns, using my weight to keep us on course, but there was an element of reckless abandon to it, a surrender to gravity and momentum that couldn't be fully controlled.

We hit a particularly big bump near the bottom, launching us into the air. For a suspended moment, we were weightless, flying, and then we crashed back down at an angle that sent the toboggan careening sideways. It flipped, sending both of us tumbling into a drift of soft powder, a tangle of limbs and breathless laughter as we rolled to a stop.

I ended up on my back, Madeline sprawled on top of me, her hair dusted with snow, her eyes bright with exhilaration. She was laughing so hard she could barely speak, her whole body shaking with it, and the sight was so beautiful it made my chest ache.

"You're a menace," she gasped when she finally caught her breath, making no move to disentangle herself from me.

"Oh you loved it," I countered, reaching up to brush snow from her cheek, letting my fingers linger against her skin.

"I literally thought we were going to die."

I grinned, unrepentant. "If we had, at least you died clinging to me. Not a bad way to go."

She raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a smile that was equal parts exasperation and affection.

"You're really proud of that one, huh?"

"A little," I admitted, reveling in the way she rolled her eyes, in the easy banter between us that felt both familiar and new.

"You should be," she said, shifting slightly so she was more comfortably positioned on top of me, her elbows resting on either side of my head. "That was almost smooth."

"Almost?" I challenged, letting my hands settle on her hips, anchoring her against me.

Her smile turned playful, teasing. "You're lucky I like a little chaos," she said, her eyes dropping to my lips in a way that made my heart skip.

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face, couldn't contain the surge of happiness that welled up inside me. "Very lucky," I agreed, my voice softer now, more sincere.

And then I kissed her.

Not like last night—desperate, hungry, driven by months of denial and pent-up tension. This was different. Deliberate. Chosen. A kiss in full daylight, with the sun warm on our faces and the snow cold beneath us and the whole world spread out around us.

I kissed her slowly, savoring the softness of her lips, the small sound she made in the back of her throat as she melted against me. My hands came up to frame her face, fingers tangling in her hair, holding her close as if she might disappear if I let go. Her weight on top of me was grounding, perfect, like she belonged there.

She smiled into the kiss, a curve of lips against mine that filled me with a happiness so intense it was almost painful. I couldn't stop, couldn't get enough of her—the taste of her, the feel of her, the reality of Madeline Hayes in my arms in broad daylight, choosing this, choosing me.

We stayed like that, trading unhurried kisses as the snow melted beneath us, soaking into our clothes, until the chill finally became impossible to ignore. Madeline pulled back, her lips reddened from our kisses, her eyes soft with something I was afraid to name.

"We should get up," she murmured, though she made no move to do so. "Before we freeze to death."

"In a minute," I said, stealing one more kiss, then another, unable to let her go just yet.

She laughed against my mouth, a sound of pure joy that I felt in every cell of my body. "So bossy," she teased, but she didn't pull away, didn't resist as I rolled us over so she was beneath me, snow flying up around us.

"You like it when I'm bossy don't you?," I countered, hovering over her, drinking in the sight of her—cheeks flushed, hair fanned out against the snow, looking up at me with eyes so bright they put the winter sky to shame.

"Maybe," she admitted, hooking a leg around mine, pulling me closer. "Just a little."

This time when we kissed, there was more heat to it, more urgency. Her hands slipped beneath my jacket, cold against my skin, making me gasp. I retaliated by nipping at her lower lip, soothing the slight sting with my tongue. She arched against me, a soft sound escaping her that made my whole body tighten with want.

"We should get back to the toboggan," I managed to say when we finally broke apart, both of us breathing hard. "One more run before we have to

head back."

She nodded, looking as dazed as I felt, as reluctant to move. "One more," she agreed, her voice husky in a way that made it hard to remember why we should stop kissing at all.

We helped each other up, brushing snow from our clothes, stealing kisses between attempts to make ourselves presentable. It was futile—we were both soaked, disheveled, flushed in a way that had little to do with the cold and everything to do with each other. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except this moment, this perfect bubble of happiness we'd carved out for ourselves.

We trudged back up the hill, hand in hand, the toboggan dragging behind us. The climb was harder than it had looked from the bottom, our legs burning with the effort, but we kept going, spurring each other on with playful taunts and promises of what would happen when we reached the top.

And then we did it all over again—the rush down the hill, the tumble at the bottom, the tangle of limbs and laughter and kisses that seemed to stretch time into eternity.

For most of my life, I'd kept people at a distance, built walls to protect myself from the pain of loss, from the vulnerability of caring too much. But here, with Madeline, those walls felt unnecessary, even unwanted. I wanted her to see me—all of me, not just the guarded, sarcastic exterior I showed the world.

And more incredibly, I wanted to see her—the real Madeline beneath the perfect facade, the girl who laughed until she snorted, who clung to me on a toboggan ride, who kissed me like I was something precious she'd been searching for all along.

Whatever came next—whatever complications awaited us back in the real world—this moment was ours. This happiness, this freedom, this connection that felt both brand new and somehow like coming home.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, I wasn't afraid of what might happen. I wasn't bracing for loss, for abandonment, for disappointment. I was simply here, present, alive in my own skin, with Madeline *Grace* Hayes looking at me like I was everything she wanted. And it felt incredible.

CHAPTER THIRTY

MADELINE

Time melted away in the small clearing, the world beyond the snow-laden trees ceasing to exist. After our final toboggan run, we'd collapsed into a tangled heap, laughing and breathless, neither of us willing to break the spell by suggesting we return to reality. Now we lay side by side on the upturned sled, my head resting on Brooke's shoulder, her arm wrapped around me as if she'd always held me like this, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

The adrenaline of our runs had faded, replaced by a different kind of exhilaration—quieter but no less potent. I could still taste Brooke's chapstick on my lips, still feel the ghost of her touch on my skin, still hear the sound of her laughter echoing in my ears. My body felt alive in a way it never had before, every nerve ending hyperaware of her presence beside me.

It was perfect. Utterly, completely perfect.

And that's what scared me most.

Perfect things don't last—not in my experience. Perfect things are fragile, easily shattered, impossible to maintain. I'd spent my whole life cultivating an image of perfection, and I knew better than anyone how exhausting, how hollow it could be. What if this was just another illusion, another performance that would eventually crumble under the weight of reality?

What if I don't deserve this?

What if I can't be what she needs?

The questions circled in my mind like vultures, threatening to consume the joy I'd found in Brooke's arms. I'd spent so long being who everyone else wanted me to be—the perfect daughter, the perfect girlfriend, the perfect queen bee—that I wasn't sure I even knew who I really was anymore. How could I offer myself to someone else when I barely understood myself?

I shifted slightly, turning to look at Brooke, studying her profile in the winter sunlight. Her dark hair had escaped from her beanie in places, falling across her forehead in a way that made my fingers itch to brush it back. Her cheeks were flushed with cold, her breath forming small clouds in the air with each exhale. I'd never seen anyone more beautiful, more real, more utterly captivating.

"So... what do we do now?" I asked, my voice softer than I'd intended, betraying my uncertainty.

Brooke glanced over, one arm propped on the sled rail, her expression relaxed yet attentive. "We go back. Change. Pretend we didn't almost flip a sled and die," she said, the corner of her mouth quirking up in that half-smile that made my stomach flutter.

I gave a weak laugh, shaking my head slightly. "That's not what I meant."

A beat of silence stretched between us, charged with everything unsaid. I took a deep breath, gathering my courage.

"I meant... us."

Brooke didn't move, but I felt her attention sharpen, felt the subtle shift in her posture as she braced herself. Her voice dropped slightly, becoming more careful, more measured. "You tell me."

The ball was in my court. Of course it was. After everything that had happened between us—the arguments, the tutoring sessions, the tension that had finally snapped last night in a rush of desperate kisses and searching hands—it was only fair that she wanted clarity.

I looked down at my gloves, picking at a loose thread, swallowing against the fear crawling up my throat.

"I don't know what I am," I admitted, the words feeling rough and unpolished.

"Like... I've never thought about girls that way before. And now all I can think about is *you*. But I don't know if that means I'm gay, or bi, or if I've just completely lost my mind."

I laughed, but it cracked in the middle, betraying the emotion behind it.

"I don't want to screw this up because I'm confused," I added quietly, finally voicing the fear that had been gnawing at me since I woke up this morning, since I felt the weight of Brooke's absence in my bed, since I realized how desperately I wanted her back there.

Brooke was quiet for a second, considering my words. Her gaze was steady, unflinching, even as I struggled to meet it.

"You don't need to know what you are," she said finally, her voice gentle but firm.

"You just need to know what you feel."

I looked up, something in her tone drawing my eyes to hers. She wasn't smiling now, her expression serious, almost vulnerable. Her voice stayed steady, but I noticed her fingers curling slightly against the sled, as if she was trying to keep herself still, to maintain control.

"Love isn't a label," she continued, the word 'love' hanging in the air between us, heavy with implication. "It's a choice. A terrifying, inconvenient, impossible choice. And I'd rather be chosen by someone who's scared than ignored by someone who's sure."

I blinked hard, sudden emotion burning behind my eyes. Her words cut straight through my defenses, laying bare fears I hadn't fully articulated even to myself. She saw me—really saw me—in a way no one else ever had. Not my parents with their rigid expectations, not my friends with their superficial concerns, not even Sam with his genuine affection. Brooke saw past the image to the messy, uncertain girl beneath, and somehow, impossibly, she still wanted me.

"But what if I figure it out and I'm not what you need?" I asked, the question barely above a whisper.

Brooke held my gaze for a long moment, something fierce and tender warring in her expression.

"Then we'll deal with it if it happens," she said finally.

"I'm not here because you're perfect, Maddie. I'm here because you're *real*. And because, for once, I don't want to run away from something that actually matters."

The nickname sent a warm flutter through my chest, somehow more intimate than anything we'd shared in the darkness of our room. Coming from her lips, it felt like a gift, a claim, a bridge between who I pretended to be and who I actually was.

"Brooke..." I whispered, unable to articulate the swell of emotion her words had caused.

She looked away, her jaw tightening slightly in that way I'd come to recognize as her trying to maintain control, to not show too much vulnerability.

"I'm not asking you to fix anything," she said, her voice rougher now.

"I just—I want something that doesn't feel like I'm holding my breath the whole time, waiting for it to end."

Silence settled between us, not awkward or tense, but weighted with shared understanding. This wasn't just about last night, about physical attraction or momentary passion. This was about something deeper, something that had been building since that first day in the tutoring center, perhaps even before—a recognition, a connection that defied easy categorization.

I reached for her hand, my gloved fingers interlacing with hers.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, meaning it more than I'd meant anything in a long time.

Brooke didn't say anything for a moment, her eyes fixed on our joined hands.

Then, softly: "You say that now."

The doubt in her voice broke my heart, reminding me of everything she'd shared about her mom, about how people had drifted away after her death, about the walls she'd built to protect herself from more loss. I leaned in, my forehead resting gently against hers, needing the physical connection, needing her to feel the truth of my words.

"I've never been sure of anything in my life," I admitted, my voice barely audible in the small space between us. "But I've never felt more *me* than I do when I'm with you. And that *means* something to me"

I hesitated, then added: "I don't want to hide this forever. I don't want it to be something I only get to have when no one else is looking."

The admission surprised even me. I'd spent so long carefully managing my image, my reputation, that the thought of openly acknowledging whatever this was—this thing with Brooke, this version of myself I was only just discovering—should have terrified me. And it did, in a way. But the thought of keeping it hidden, of relegating it to shadows and secrets, felt even worse.

Brooke nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Then maybe we don't hide. Not really. Just... keep it ours. Until we're ready for more."

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it felt like a promise—a commitment to something real, something that could grow at its own pace, outside the expectations and judgments of others. I nodded, relief washing through me.

"Even if I fall apart?" I asked, the question exposing the vulnerability I usually tried so hard to conceal.

"Especially then," Brooke said softly, her voice a caress.

She kissed me then—not with the desperate heat of last night, but with something gentler, more grounding. A promise, a reassurance, a connection that transcended physical desire. I melted into it, my hands coming up to frame her face, holding her close as if I could somehow imprint this moment into my skin, make it a permanent part of me.

"I don't know what I am," I whispered against her lips, the confession both terrifying and liberating.

"But I know I want *you*. I need you."

Brooke pulled me in tighter, her arms strong and sure around me.

"Then that's enough for me," she murmured, her breath warm against my skin.

We didn't fix everything in that moment. We didn't erase the complications waiting for us back at the resort—Sam's confusion, my friends' questions, the inevitable gossip that would follow. We didn't promise forever or make grand declarations.

But we chose each other. Here, now, in this small clearing on a mountain covered in snow, we chose to be real with each other, to be vulnerable, to step toward something neither of us fully understood but both desperately wanted.

And somehow, that was enough.

Eventually, reluctantly, we had to leave our sanctuary. The shadows were lengthening, the temperature dropping as afternoon faded toward evening. We had a bus to catch, rooms to pack up, a return to the real world that couldn't be postponed indefinitely.

Hand in hand, we made our way back through the trees, the toboggan dragging behind us, creating twin tracks in the snow that marked our path. I thought about those tracks, about how they would remain there after we were gone, visible evidence of our presence, of our connection, until the next snowfall covered them completely.

"Brooke?" I said as the resort buildings came into view in the distance.

"Hmm?" She turned to look at me, her profile sharp against the winter landscape.

"Thank you. For today. For..." I gestured vaguely, unable to articulate everything I meant. For seeing me. For wanting me anyway. For showing

me a version of myself I never knew existed.

She smiled, that rare, genuine smile that transformed her face, that made my heart catch in my chest.

"We'll figure it out," she said simply, squeezing my hand.

"Together."

Together. The word echoed in my mind, unfamiliar yet comforting. I'd been surrounded by people my entire life—friends, family, admirers, hangers-on—but I'd never felt less alone than I did with Brooke by my side.

As we approached the edge of the woods, the noise and bustle of the resort growing louder with each step, I held onto that feeling, tucking it away like a talisman against whatever came next. We would face questions, complications, judgments. We would have to navigate the aftermath of what had started in the darkness of our room and continued in the bright sunlight of our private clearing.

But for now, for this moment, I allowed myself to simply be—to be with Brooke, to be uncertain but hopeful, to be more myself than I had ever been.

And it was enough. It was more than enough.
It was everything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BROOKE

We were still laughing when we reached our room, stumbling through the door with snow melting in our hair and color high in our cheeks.

My jacket was completely soaked through, my jeans stiff with ice around the ankles, but I barely noticed the discomfort. All I could focus on was Madeline beside me—her windburned cheeks, her bright eyes, the way her laugh seemed to fill every corner of the room.

But beneath the laughter, beneath the lingering high of our toboggan runs, something else simmered between us. A tension that had been building since our conversation in the clearing, a pull that hadn't quite been satisfied by our kisses in the snow. I could feel it in the way her eyes kept finding mine, in the slight catch in her breath when our hands brushed as we entered the room.

I had barely managed to toss my gloves on the dresser when Madeline moved. In two swift steps, she was in front of me, her fingers curling into the collar of my jacket, pulling me toward her with a certainty that stole my breath.

And then she was kissing me.

Not like in the snow—playful, exploratory, sunlit. This was different. Immediate. Consuming. Her lips pressed against mine with an urgency that made my knees weak, her body pushing mine back until I felt the wall behind me. Her fingers were cold against my neck as she deepened the kiss, but I barely registered it, too lost in the heat of her mouth, the taste of her on my tongue.

I responded with equal fervor, my arms encircling her waist, lifting her slightly so that she had to tilt her head down to maintain the kiss. The small sound she made in the back of her throat sent electricity racing down my spine, igniting something primal and possessive deep within me. I kissed her like it was the only chance I'd get, like I could somehow convey through touch all the things I couldn't yet put into words.

We didn't speak. We didn't need to. Every press of lips, every sweep of tongue, every shared breath was a conversation unto itself—more honest, more direct than any words could have been.

My hands found their way beneath her jacket, spread wide against her back, feeling the heat of her through her thin shirt. She arched into me, her body fitting against mine as if designed for it, as if we'd been doing this for years instead of mere hours. One of her hands tangled in my hair, tugging lightly in a way that drew a low groan from me, a sound I hardly recognized as my own.

Time lost meaning as we stood there, locked together, the rest of the world fading to background noise. There was only Madeline—her taste, her scent, the soft curves of her body beneath my hands, the way she seemed to want me with the same desperate intensity that I wanted her.

Eventually, breathlessly, we broke apart. Her forehead rested against mine, our ragged breathing the only sound in the quiet room. Her pupils were blown wide, her lips swollen from our kisses, and I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

"We have to go soon," she whispered, though she made no move to step away, her hands still cupping my face as if she couldn't bear to let go.

"I know," I replied, equally reluctant to break the moment.

We stood that way for another heartbeat, another breath, before reality reasserted itself. We had a bus to catch. A return journey to face. A world beyond this room that wouldn't wait, no matter how much we might wish it would.

With visible reluctance, Madeline stepped back, her hands sliding from my face to my shoulders, down my arms, before finally releasing me. The loss of contact left me oddly bereft, though she was still standing right in front of me.

"We should change," she said, gesturing to our wet clothes. "Before we freeze."

I nodded, trying to gather my scattered thoughts, to remember the practical needs of the moment. "Right. Yes."

We moved in a strange dance then, gathering dry clothes from our bags, taking turns in the bathroom to change. The intimacy of last night had somehow not prepared me for this—this mundane, domestic sharing of space, this awareness of her presence even when she was out of sight. It felt

more significant somehow, more real than the passionate moments we'd already shared.

When I emerged from the bathroom in dry jeans and a fresh hoodie, I found Madeline already changed, standing by the window, looking out at the mountain we'd come to know so well over the past few days. The late afternoon light caught in her hair, turning it to spun gold against the backdrop of snow-covered peaks.

She turned at the sound of the door, her eyes finding mine across the room, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. We didn't speak—didn't need to. Something had shifted between us, something fundamental and irreversible.

I moved to my suitcase, finishing the last of my packing with methodical efficiency. From the corner of my eye, I could see Madeline doing the same, occasionally stealing glances in my direction when she thought I wasn't looking.

Ten minutes later, I zipped up my duffel and turned to find her watching me from the mirror, her expression soft, contemplative, her lips still curved as if remembering our kiss against the wall.

For a moment, we just looked at each other, letting the weight of everything that had happened—everything that was still happening—settle between us. No words needed, no explanations or promises necessary. Just this quiet understanding, this shared secret that belonged only to us.

Then, with a small nod, I picked up my bag and snowboard. "Ready?"

"Ready," she said, grabbing her own luggage.

As we left the room that had witnessed so much change in such a short time, I felt a strange mixture of emotions—sadness at leaving this bubble where we'd discovered each other, but also anticipation for what might come next, for the possibility that stretched before us like an untracked slope.

The bus was chaos incarnate—too many voices, too many bodies, too many bags being shoved into overhead compartments. The noise level was nearly deafening as everyone scrambled to find seats, to secure their belongings, to share last-minute stories of their adventures on the mountain.

I climbed on first, making my way down the aisle toward the back where it might be quieter, where we might find a small pocket of privacy amid the commotion. I claimed a window seat, shoving my backpack under the seat in front of me, keeping my expression carefully neutral. Just another student

heading home after a school trip, nothing remarkable, nothing worth noticing.

My heart was beating too fast though, my eyes constantly darting to the front of the bus, waiting. Would she sit with her friends? With Sam? Would our brief idyll on the mountain dissolve the moment we returned to the real world?

And then she appeared—Madeline Hayes, queen bee, golden girl, the person everyone expected to hold court in the center of the bus surrounded by her usual entourage. She stood in the aisle for a moment, her gaze sweeping the bus, passing over me without lingering, giving nothing away.

My stomach twisted with a sudden, irrational fear. Had she changed her mind already? Was this where it ended, before it had really begun?

But then, with a casualness that had to be practiced, she made her way down the aisle and slid into the seat beside me, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if we'd been sitting together on buses our whole lives.

Our eyes met for half a second, a brief, electric moment of connection before we both looked away, conscious of the dozens of potential observers surrounding us.

"Hi," she said, her voice low, just for me.

"Hey," I replied softly, relief washing through me in a warm wave.

The bus lurched into motion, the noise level rising as everyone settled in for the long journey home. Conversations overlapped, laughter rang out, complaining about having to leave mingled with excited recounting of adventures had and slopes conquered.

In the midst of it all, Madeline reached into her coat pocket, pulled out her phone, and wordlessly offered me one earbud. The simple gesture felt strangely intimate, a small act of sharing that spoke volumes in its quiet normalcy.

I took the earbud, our fingers brushing in the exchange, sending a small jolt of awareness through me. She hit play, and the opening chords of "Every Breath You Take" by The Police slipped into my ear.

I turned my head slowly, raising an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

She smirked, looking out the window as if the song choice meant nothing, but the slight curve of her lips betrayed her. "You said you liked 80s hits. I'm just accommodating your taste."

"Right," I drawled, fighting a smile. "So it's not about the obsessive stalker lyrics at all?"

Her grin widened, a mischievous glint in her eye as she finally looked at me. "What can I say? I like dramatic metaphors."

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head at her audacity, but my heart was beating louder than the bassline, my skin hyperaware of every point where our bodies connected—shoulders touching, arms brushing, pinkies occasionally meeting on the seat between us.

We fell into a comfortable silence after that, letting the music fill the space between us. The bus rumbled along, the snowy landscape giving way to pine forests and eventually to the more familiar surroundings that signaled our approach to town. Outside the window, the world continued its normal rhythm, oblivious to the seismic shifts that had occurred in my universe over the past few days.

"So," Madeline said after a while, her voice low enough to be lost in the general din of the bus.

"You still good with what we said?"

I didn't look at her right away, watching the trees blur past the window, considering her question.

"Keeping it quiet for now? Yeah. If that's what you need."

From the corner of my eye, I saw her chew her lower lip, a rare display of uncertainty from someone who usually projected nothing but confidence.

"It's not about hiding," she clarified, her voice softer now.

"I just... I want this to be ours before everyone else tries to name it for us."

I turned to her then, meeting her gaze directly, letting her see the certainty I felt, the calm that had settled over me despite the newness, the unexpected nature of what was happening between us.

"It already is."

Her smile then—small, genuine, a little vulnerable around the edges—made something in my chest tighten. She hesitated for a moment, then leaned her head lightly against my shoulder, a gesture that might look casual to anyone watching but that felt profoundly significant to me.

"And later?" she asked, the question barely audible.

"Later, we stop pretending we don't know what this is," I replied simply.

We didn't kiss. We couldn't, not here, not with so many eyes around us. But we didn't need to. The weight of her head on my shoulder, the shared music connecting us, the quiet understanding between us—it was enough for now. More than enough.

As the bus continued its journey toward home, toward whatever awaited us beyond this trip, I found myself in a strange state of calm. Not because I knew what would happen next, but precisely because I didn't, and for once, that uncertainty didn't terrify me.

I didn't know what came next. I didn't know how long we'd be able to keep this quiet, or how much harder it might get. But as she leaned into me, sharing silence and a song, I realized I wasn't afraid of the unknown anymore. Because this, whatever it was, felt worth the risk.

For someone who had spent years guarding her heart, who had built walls to keep everyone at a safe distance, who had learned the painful lesson that people always leave in the end, it was a revelation. A beginning. A promise to myself as much as to her.

This time, *I* would stay. This time, *I* would let myself believe in the possibility of something real, something lasting, something worth fighting for.

And from the way Madeline's fingers had found mine in the space between us, from the gentle pressure of her head against my shoulder, from the quiet sigh that escaped her as the music played on, I thought—I hoped—she felt the same.

Whatever came next, we would face it together. Not perfect. Not certain. But real.

And for now, that was enough.

THE END

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